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THE MYSTERY
OF THE
TWIN RUBIES

THE MYSTERY OF THE TWIN RUBIES

BY

ARMSTRONG LIVINGSTON

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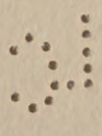

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THE MYSTERY OF THE TWIN RUBIES

Chapter One

HIS FIRST BUTLER

MR. JEREMIAH BRONSON, of the firm of Bronson and Bartlett, real-estate brokers, opened a copy of the *New York Herald* upon the desk in front of him and ran a thin, nervous finger down the column of "help wanted" ads. until he found the one he sought. He nodded his satisfaction, and was just engaged in refolding the paper when he heard the heavy footfall of his partner approaching from the next room.

"Good morning, Jerry!" said Mr. Bartlett.

"Good morning."

It was really three o'clock of a warm afternoon in June, but as it chanced to be the first time the two had met that day they, automatically, used their customary greeting.

Bartlett dropped into a chair beside his partner's desk with more decision than grace — he ran to fat — and gave a sigh of relief as he drew a handkerchief and mopped his red, good-natured face. He had one of those curious-shaped heads that are almost pointed on top, thereafter slanting down — and outward until they finish in broad jowls, and the same architectural scheme was carried out on a larger scale by the next division of his body. His shoulders were by no means broad, so that his sides were obliged to run out at an amazing angle in order to encompass his magnificent girth. As he sat there, his short, plump legs scarcely reaching the floor, it was easy to see why his friends and business associates good-humoredly referred to him among themselves as "The Bartlett Pear."

"The Murdock deal is closed, Jerry," he announced, and added after a slight pause, "They put up a noble struggle, but eventually gave in at our figure."

Bronson swung around in his chair, beaming approval.

"Thanks to your hard work and good judgment, Henry," he exclaimed cordially. "I congratulate

you on your success — and myself on having such an excellent partner!"

"Tut, tut, Jerry!" responded Bartlett, getting a little redder. He noticed the newspaper that lay on the other's desk, and quickly jumped to a less embarrassing subject. "By the way, what's the news? I have not had a minute to look at a paper."

"Nor have I. When you came in, I was just looking to see that the *Herald* had not forgotten to run an advertisement of mine for a — for a servant."

"Huh!" Bartlett betrayed amusement. "I know that's the main occupation of you poor suburbanites. Which is it now — cook or house-maid?"

"Er — neither. We're looking for a butler."

"Oh, excuse *me!*" The Bartlett Pear regarded his partner with some admiration. "By gracious, Jerry, you *are* going it strong! Is this the effect of prosperity upon yourself, or is it the effect of the Claredale atmosphere upon Mrs. Bronson?"

"It's mostly Mary," admitted Bronson a little sadly. "Not that I don't agree with her, of course," he continued hastily. "Most of the Claredale crowd live as they consider that Claredale folks should

live, and have butlers, so as long as we're going to live there we might as well fall into line."

"I see. . . . Are they a pretty nice bunch?"

"Why — I don't know." Bronson was mildly surprised, and showed it "I suppose so, but I haven't really given much thought to it. The English are the best, I expect, though the Japs have always appealed to me as being quick and intelligent — "

"Excuse me, Jerry. I wasn't asking you about butlers; I sought your opinon of those society stars to whom you have just irreverently referred as the 'Claredale crowd.'"

"Oh." Mr. Bronson smiled faintly, and caressed the top of a head that was becoming gray in some spots and distinctly bald in others. "I find them very nice — very nice indeed. Our welcome to Claredale has been most — hospitable. Mary is looking forward to a delightful summer of being entertained — and entertaining. Hence the butler."

"Mmm. Well, it will be a fresh experience for you," he ruminated. "I suppose a man's first butler must be like his first silk hat, or, as it was said of Caesar's wife — above suspicion."

"I dare say," returned Bronson without enthusiasm. "I remember I hated mine."

Bartlett chuckled, and rose from his chair.

"By the by, Jerry," he said more crisply. "You have the letters in the Graham matter; if you'll give them to me I'll skip around to the old boy's office."

Bronson immediately delved into the mass of accumulated papers that littered his desk — a desk that no one of a dozen generations of stenographers had ever been able to keep in order, for the senior partner antedated the business era that thrives and flourishes upon elaborate filing-systems. He paid the penalty now as he ran through pile after pile of documents, and finally began pulling out drawers.

"Got it!" announced the Bartlett Pear triumphantly from across the room. He had detected the missing letters on top of the office safe. He held them up to view, shaking his head in mock sadness, but with the fine twinkle of amusement in his eyes that so often brightened his face and atoned for its habitual heaviness. "Take my word for it, Jerry; your carelessness is going to get you into

serious trouble one of these days — if you aren't careful!"

"Pshaw!" Bronson's hand strayed to his head again, as it always did when he was embarrassed. "I see there's no help for it, Henry. 'Efficiency' is the watchword of business to-day. I shall have to get one of those new-fangled automatic filing cabinets that give three clicks, walk across the room, and hand you just the paper you've whistled for."

They both smiled at this flight of fancy, and with a cheerful word of farewell Bartlett took his ponderous way from his partner's office to his own.

Left to himself, the head of the firm conscientiously restored his desk from its present state of chaos to the earlier state of chaos that it had enjoyed prior to the disturbing search for the Graham letters. That done, he bethought himself of a more congenial pastime.

He strolled over to the window, through which the afternoon sun was streaming brilliantly, fumbled in his pocket and drew forth a flat, oval box such as jewelers use. He opened it tenderly, then waved it gently to and fro so that the jewels within might catch the full brightness of the sunlight. He

smiled lovingly at the crimson flames that darted from the facets of each ruby.

A tap at the door interrupted the fire-worshipper. He snapped the lid upon his flashing treasures, restored the case to his pocket, and called out a summons to enter.

The door opened slightly, a shock of red hair appeared in the aperture, and the piping voice of the office-boy made pronouncement.

"Some'un to see you, sir. About a advertisement, he says."

"Show him in."

There was no hint of perturbation in the sharp command. In this, one of the crises of his life, Jeremiah Bronson was perfect master of himself and his emotions; he merely flirted one hand to his necktie to make sure that it was straight, while the other shot to his head to see that the third wisp of hair — counting up from his forehead — was faithfully performing its appointed duty of concealing a particularly chilly piece of scalp. Then he was ready to interview his first butler.

The office-boy reappeared, followed by a tall, well-built man of perhaps thirty-five years, neatly

dressed in a suit of some dark gray material, a carefully knotted, navy blue four-in-hand, a stiff collar, a quiet pair of socks, and well-polished black shoes. Mr. Bronson, from the corner of his eye, drew a swift impression of a subdued, respectful manner.

"Mr. Peters, sir!" The office boy vanished.

Jerry Bronson, with ostentatious difficulty, recalled his rapt attention from the two-year-old business communication that had come first to hand.

"Oh — yes. You have come to see me — ?"

"About your advertisement in this morning's *Herald,* sir." The man's voice was pleasant and well-modulated.

"Exactly. Of course, you noted that I want a man only for the summer months?"

"Yes, sir. That would suit me very nicely, sir. My present employer is leaving for California, and he has asked me to come back to him when he returns in the fall.

"Who is he?"

"Mr. Reginald McKittrick. A writer, sir."

"He is willing, I presume, to recommend you? I should expect, of course, to know that."

Peters silently produced an envelope from some hidden recess in the dark gray suit and handed it over with a slight bow. Bronson read the enclosed note at a glance, for it was brief and clear. It highly recommended the bearer, John Peters, as an honest and faithful servant who had been in the writer's employ for five years, and it was signed, "Reginald McKittrick."

The broker looked up. "This seems quite satisfactory," he said. "What wages do you want?"

"One hundred dollars a month, sir."

Mr. Bronson experienced the same agreeable sensation to which he thrilled when he scented a bargain in real estate. He had expected to pay at least a hundred and fifty, and he concealed his feelings with some trouble.

"That is not unreasonable," he admitted. He leaned back in his chair, half-closed his eyes, and appeared lost in some abstruse calculation. He emerged to volunteer some information concerning himself. "Um! There are five of us in the family — counting my little girl, Cicely, who is only eight and does not come to the table. Besides yourself, we keep a cook and housemaid."

"Will I be expected to do any outside work, sir?"

"Oh, no. The gardener does all that."

"Thank you, sir."

"You say that Mr. McKittrick is expecting to leave for California: does that mean that you cannot come to me at once?"

"He has tickets for to-morrow morning, sir. I think he would like me to spend the rest of the day in straightening up the apartment, but I could report to you any time the following day."

"Wednesday," hazarded Jerry, and confirmed this shrewd guess by a glance at the calendar above his desk. At the same time he rose to his feet with an air of finality. "Very well, Peters. Consider yourself engaged, and take your things out to Claredale as early on Wednesday as you can manage." He turned his back to his desk and scribbled a line or two. "Here is my address. You can look up a convenient train for yourself."

"Very good, sir. I'm sure I hope you'll be satisfied, sir."

He was gone in an instant, shutting the door swiftly and silently behind him with a touch that Jerry hoped the office-boy might note.

The broker felt very well satisfied. The interview had been fifty per cent easier, and fifty dollars cheaper, than he had dared to hope, and as he looked back upon it, he could not help wishing that some other affairs of life might be settled half as quickly and as easily. Then his native business sense gave him a cautionary nudge.

"Might as well check that reference," he muttered, and reached for the telephone book.

He found McKittrick's number without any difficulty, but his effort to get connected met with a steady response of "don't answer" from a curt central. He eventually gave it up, and as it was really past his time for the daily dash to the 4.50 train, he seized his hat and gloves and raced madly from the office. In a moment he was racing back twice as fast to secure his cane, an implement of social amenity that was still a novelty to him and that he was prone to forget in his more hurried moods.

Fifty minutes later he alighted from the train at Claredale and marched briskly across the station platform, inhaling deep draughts of the fresh country air and twirling the cane with the jauntiness peculiar to gentlemen of fifty-odd who are well-to-

do and at peace with the world. A number of handsome automobiles were ranged against the platform, waiting upon their fortunate owners, and his attention was instantly caught by the familiar outlines of a dark blue touring-car and the still more familiar outlines of the charming young woman at its wheel.

"Hello, Joan! This is very thoughtful of you."

"Hello, Cousin Jerry." The girl opened the low door at her side and jumped lightly to the ground. "It has been so beastly hot that I thought you might appreciate a drive instead of your usual walk."

She spoke with a faint but unmistakable English accent, an evidence of her nationality that was borne out by her fair hair, her blue eyes, and her exquisite complexion. She was exceedingly pretty, too, and made a delightful picture as she stood by the side of the blue car, her tall, slim figure arrayed in snowy white from the big floppy hat to the small canvas shoes.

"Hop in," she said, "—or do you want to drive?"

Mr. Bronson preferred to hop in. She slipped into her place at the wheel, slammed the door behind her, and skilfully guided the blue car through a score of departing motors. There was an interlude of hairbreadth escapes and apologetic smiles, and then they were clear of the crowd and running smoothly along a shady boulevard.

"This is bully!" cried Jerry, and there was something almost boyish in the gesture with which he presently seized his stiff straw hat and tossed it into the tonneau of the car. "Why didn't you bring your Cousin Mary?"

"Bridge," answered Joan tersely. "At the club. With the Lathams."

"Oh. And why aren't you there?"

"On a day like this?" Her sweeping gesture might have been even more emphatic if she had not been compelled to keep one hand on the wheel. "I had two sets with the Brownell boys, took a tub, and here I am."

"Well, I'm very glad you are! And Cicely?"

"At a children's party."

"Good for her! Are there any other items of local interest?"

"N-no, I don't think so." Then her pretty mouth suddenly hardened. "Oh, yes! Sidney telephoned just before I left that he would not be home until late."

"Ah!" said Mr. Bronson.

A little silence fell upon them.

Chapter Two

SOME REFERENCES

THEY kept steadily on for ten miles. The boulevard had given place to a dusty country road, and the last villas of surburbia had been supplanted by a series of weather-beaten farmhouses before Joan took advantage of a cross-road to back and turn the big car.

"Do we pick up your Cousin Mary?"

"No," answered the girl. "She expected the Lathams to run her home — and anyway she wouldn't be ready yet. You know what the bridge crowd is when it gets a chance to settle down to work on a really nice June day in the country."

"You seem to have quarreled with bridge, Joan. I thought you rather liked it."

"I do and I don't," she answered non-committally.

She had few secrets from her Cousin Jerry, of

whom she was very fond, and she would have been glad to tell him in considerable detail just what it was she disliked about the game as played in Claredale. But loyalty to her Cousin Mary sealed her lips.

It is not unusual for a naturally broad-minded man to have one or two pet aversions, just as non-superstitious people who go out of their way to defy the lightning will nevertheless balk at passing under a ladder or raising an umbrella in the house. Thus Jerry Bronson, who was in most things tolerant to a fault, but who suddenly developed the fanaticism of a reformer when it came to the subject of gambling. He was frankly rabid on the question, and prepared to exhaust all the vilifying adjectives in Roget's Thesaurus to express his opinion of a man who sacrificed wantonly to the Goddess of Chance. He shared the inconsistency of some reformers too in that he would never admit, even to himself, that his own business had in it any element of speculation. He believed, like many a better man, that his successful *coups* owed nothing to luck but everything to his shrewdness and prescience. A tactless young man who had once argued

with him to the contrary never forgot the experience. . . .

When Jerry moved to Claredale at his wife's behest, there soon appeared slight suggestions of storm clouds on the matrimonial horizon. It so happened that bridge amounted to a craze that summer, and Mrs. Bronson, young, attractive, socially ambitious, discovered, in about five minutes, that her way into the hearts and boudoirs of the Claredale aristocracy ran via the cozy little card-room at the country club. Arose then the question of stakes, and Jerry was consulted. True to form, he gave a passable presentation of Mt. Pelee in a fit of eruption. True to form, Mrs. Bronson wept like Niagara Falls. The flood vanquished the volcano, and Jerry consented to her playing for points, "provided they were small."

Joan thought of these things as she drove the car homeward, and her reflections brought a bitter little smile to her lips. Small stakes! She had a vivid recollection of a bad twenty minutes in the club when a poor hand and a wretched partner had set her back exactly one month's pocket-money; since then she had dexterously dodged, or refused, all in-

vitations to the little green tables. But Mary. . . . No, she decidedly preferred not to discuss bridge in detail with her Cousin Jerry!

It was half past six when they drove snorting into the garage, and a question to the gardener, who hastened up, made it evident that Joan had not over-estimated the fascination of the game for her cousin. No, Mrs. Bronson was not home yet.

Secretly, Jerry was not displeased with the news. It meant that his wife was enjoying herself, and that, after all, was the reason for this new home at Claredale, for the new automobile of superior horse-power, for the new cane that trailed behind him as he walked to the house, and — confound him! — for the butler whose shadow hung over their lives. It was pleasant to think that his wife's happiness was already justifying these material and spiritual efforts on her behalf. . . .

He was confirmed in this complacent belief some twenty minutes later. He was in his room when the deep blast of a motor horn, the crunch of heavy tires on the gravel driveway, and the sound of laughing voices told him that the mistress of the house had returned. He stole to his window and cautiously

looked down upon the group below. There were the two Latham women, with a Miss Willoughby, who was their guest, and there was his wife, quite the most cheerful and the prettiest and youngest-looking of them all. They stood talking and laughing for a few minutes, and he noticed that Mary lingered on the porch after the car had rolled off to wave a last farewell as it curved out the gate.

He hurried down to meet her in the front hall.

"Evening, dear! Been having a good time?"

"Oh — fair." She unpinned her hat slowly and laid it, together with her parasol, on a near-by chair. She was a slight, dark-haired woman, piquantly pretty, ten years younger than her husband, and for the moment, in the subdued light of the hall, ten years younger than that.

"How did the game go?"

"Tiresomely. I had that awful Willoughby girl for a partner and she did her worst to ruin me."

"Lose much?"

"Oh, no. Just a trifle."

Jerry gulped, but he was no Indian giver.

"The luck of the game," he observed airily. "Part of the luck is the cards you draw, and part,

your partner. The best reason for not playing bridge is the partner you get."

"Perhaps. . . ."

"By the way, Mary, I engaged a butler this afternoon."

"Did you?"

"He seems a very decent sort of man. He's due here the day after to-morrow — and now that I think of it, I must call up his present employer after dinner just to make sure that his references are in order. Will you remind me in case I forget?"

"All right, dear."

He looked at her keenly, surprised that she did not show more interest in an affair that he had thought close to her heart.

"What's the matter, Mary?" he asked. "You seem a bit quiet."

"There's nothing wrong with me, Jerry." She flashed him a quick smile. "Tired — and a little headachy perhaps." She picked up her hat and parasol and was moving toward the stairway when he checked her.

"Come into the library before you go up. Don't let yourself give way like that. Wait and look. I

have something to show you that may do your headache good."

She followed him obediently, and, when he had switched on the electric light, he handed her the jeweller's case that he had kept in his pocket. She took it with a little exclamation of pleasure.

"Oh, Jerry! What's in it?"

"Open it and see."

She pressed the catch, and gave a soft cry of delight when the lid flew back and disclosed a handsome bracelet of rubies.

"Jerry! How darling!" She slipped the jewels over her hand and caught the clasp about her wrist. "You *are* a dear — and a great deal too good for me." She drew closer to him, put her arm through his, rested her head on his shoulder — and, for an instant, ten years were lifted from them both.

"How's the headache?" he asked presently.

"Gone!" She laughed up at him, then held out her arm and admired her new present. "I'm going to keep it on, Jerry. The Stowells are coming in this evening after dinner — and I just want to show it off!"

"Of course!" He smiled indulgently. "Just as

you wish, my dear, but be careful of it, and don't forget to give it to me before you go to bed."

"I won't forget," she promised promptly, but something of the gaiety had gone from her voice, and a little of the sparkle from her eyes. "Well, I suppose it's time to get ready for dinner." She glanced at the clock that stood on his desk. "Is Sidney home yet?"

"No."

The tone of the monosyllable caught her attention.

"Isn't he coming?"

"No. He 'phoned to Joan that he would be late getting out."

"Oh! I do hope —" She knitted her smooth brows and left the sentence unfinished. "Do you suppose — ?"

"Certainly I suppose," interrupted Jerry a little irritably. "I am afraid that Sidney is getting in with a pretty fast crowd, and he seems to prefer their haunts to our home."

"And after all you've done for him!"

"I know." His eyes grew thoughtful. "Funny, isn't it? You'd think he'd show a little more appre-

ciation, considering that we've given him a home since he was a child. He knows that we're both devoted to him — that we'd do anything we could for him, and if those things don't mean anything to him there's nothing more we can do. He's twenty-three years old, and able to choose his own way of living."

"I wish he were more like Joan," reflected Mrs. Bronson.

"Oh — Joan is an unmigitated blessing!"

"It's a pity that Sidney doesn't take more interest in her," continued his wife musingly.

"I'm devoutly thankful for her sake that he doesn't!" declared her husband, with as close an approach to savagery as his nature permitted.

"Jerry! Look at the time!" Mrs. Bronson ended the conversation by hurrying off to her room, and she had barely descended again when dinner was announced.

The meal was conscientiously, but awkwardly, served by a tall, dark, young Irish girl whose rather good-looking face was marred by a sullen expression that seldom lifted its shadow from her features, and as she was in the room most of the time, conver-

sation languished. It rose to animation only for a few minutes while Joan was admiring the new bracelet, and again as Mrs. Bronson, making herself neat with a napkin, took advantage of Julia Shaughnessy's momentary absence to breathe a pious hope that the coming butler would not pass the mayonnaise in such a thrusting fashion.

"Julia means well, but she's a little over zealous," agreed Jerry Bronson mildly. "I wish Pietro would spray those rose-bushes as earnestly as Julia sprays us with food."

Dinner over, Joan and Mrs. Bronson departed for the veranda to await the expected guests while Jerry mixed himself a Scotch highball and repaired with it to the library, where he settled down to enjoy the drink and a cigarette.

There was a telephone against one wall of the room, and an extension instrument that stood, for convenience sake, on Bronson's desk. His eye was caught by the latter, and it reminded him that he had a duty still to perform.

"McKittrick! He ought to be home by now." The telephone book quickly gave him the number he sought. He called the number, and was pres-

ently answered by a quiet, polite voice that he instantly recognized as that of John Peters.

"Oh, is Mr. McKittrick there?"

"I will see, sir. Who shall I say?"

"Mr. Bronson."

"Oh, yes, Mr. Bronson. I will call him at once." Jerry crossed his right leg over his left and waited. A minute or so passed. Jerry swapped legs and continued to wait. At last a crisp, clear greeting almost startled him by its unexpectedness.

"Hello!"

"Ah — is this Mr. McKittrick?"

"Yes. Sorry to keep you waiting. What can I do for you?"

"I — er — called up in regard to your butler. He came to see me this afternoon —"

"Oh, yes. He told me he had another position in view."

"He showed me a reference from you. I suppose you will not mind confirming —"

"Certainly. Of course, he's a fine fellow."

"Honest, I suppose?"

"Perfectly."

"Sober?"

"Absolutely. He has never watered a drop of my whisky in the five years he has been in my service."

"I'm glad to hear that," said Jerry, and added genially, "I have still got something of a cellar."

"Lucky man!" said McKittrick, "A rare blessing these days! Anything else I can tell you?"

"No. That's all. Thank you very much."

"You know I want him back in October? Mind you take good care of him!"

"I assure you I will keep him in cotton wool —" began the broker a little stiffly.

"Fine. Good-bye!"

The last word was almost lost in the click of the receiver as it was snapped up at the other end. Jerry Bronson hung up his own more deliberately, as became an elderly gentleman who felt as if he had just crossed teeth with a buzz-saw.

"Abrupt chap, that," he thought. "But I suppose he's busy packing —"

He sauntered out to the veranda as the Stowells drove up to the door.

The next two hours passed quickly enough in laughter and gossip. Then the visitors said good-

night, Joan vanished in the direction of bed, and Mrs. Bronson followed her more slowly.

Jerry stepped into the library for a last cigarette, and he considered it a remarkable piece of good fortune that his first glance should happen to rest on the small safe that stood in one corner of the room. It reminded him of something, and he stepped quickly back into the hall.

"Mary!" he called. "Oh, Mary!"

She turned at the head of the stairs. "Yes, Jerry?"

"Your bracelet, dear! You forgot to give it to me after all!"

"Oh — how stupid of me!"

She descended half way to meet him.

"I'm sorry," she smiled. Good-night, dear — and thank you!"

Bronson returned to the library, dangling the bracelet from one finger and enjoying its beauty and brilliancy. He had an inordinate passion for rubies, and as he had been gathering them and giving them to his wife upon every possible occasion during their ten years of married life, he already had a very handsome and valuable collection. They

were always kept in the library safe, which, for its size, was remarkably strong and secure, and of which only he had the combination.

He knelt before it now, opened the heavy door, and placed the latest acquisition with its predecessors.

"There!" he exclaimed as he twirled the knob. "Even Bartlett would have to admit that I've been careful this time!"

Chapter Three

ENTER SIDNEY, WITH DIFFICULTY

THE following day was one of those charmingly warm ones that only suburban New York can produce in June. The thermometer registered numberless degrees in the sun, and at least ninety in the breathless shade, when John Peters stepped from the comparative coolness of the train into the baking heat that radiated from the Claredale platform. In each hand he carried a heavy suit-case, and his appearance was that of a man who is hot — very hot indeed. As the train slid on its way behind him, he put down his bags on the concrete walk, patted his face with a pocket handkerchief, and looked about him.

There were just two people in sight. At the farther end of the station from where he stood was the ticket agent, hatless and coatless, standing with his thumbs looped into his suspenders as he gazed dreamily after the disappearing train. The other

person was a girl in white who was doing something to the mechanism of a big blue car; as she stooped over the open hood, her profile was sharply outlined against the blue background of the automobile, and Peters could not help seeing that she was a very pretty girl. Remarkably pretty. The longer he gazed on her the more impressed he became, and at length he decided that she was quite the prettiest girl he had ever seen. . . .

It was absolutely necessary for him to speak either to the railroad somnambulist or the lady of the car. Peters did not hesitate an appreciable instant over a choice like that.

"I beg your pardon," he said, stepping toward the car, "but can you direct me to the residence of Mr. Jeremiah Bronson?"

Joan Ayres, who had come to the station to send a telegram, slowly straightened from her problem in mechanics and regarded him with mild surprise.

"Can you — is your name Peters?" she asked a little doubtfully.

"Yes, Miss."

"Oh." Her tone became more assured. "Well, I'm just going there." She closed the hood of the

car, dusted one hand against the other, and seated herself at the wheel. "Put your bags in the tonneau and get in yourself." He hurried to obey, and she idly noted the significant weight of the suitcases as he picked them up. "You're in luck," she said with a smile.

"I'm sure I'm very grateful, Miss," he responded fervently.

Joan had nothing further to say until they reached the house, when she jumped to the ground and bade him follow her in.

"Mr. Bronson is in the city, of course, and Mrs. Bronson will not be home until lunch. But I will show you the room you are to have." He toiled up a flight of steps behind her, and was ushered into a good-sized room in the rear of the house — a room which he noted with pleasure was bright and airy. The bed looked most comfortable. . . . "I expect you will want to get settled," added the girl, with her usual thoughtfulness for the comfort of others. "When you come downstairs you will find me on the veranda, and then I will show you the pantry."

Twenty minutes later he appeared before her,

much refreshed by a change of clothing and the liberal application of a quantity of cold water. Joan took a good look at him for the first time, and found her fleeting impression of the station confirmed. He was by no means unprepossessing, and as she led the way to the pantry, she lazily wondered why a comparatively young man, able-bodied and not bad-looking, should find himself contented in so menial a walk of life. Could he really be satisfied merely to buttle — or whatever it was that butlers did? She dismissed the question as interesting but unimportant, and after giving him a few directions in regard to lunch, she returned to the shady veranda with her book.

Peters, abandoned in the pantry, scratched his smooth-shaven chin reflectively.

"The first thing a wise butler does," he mused, "is to make himself solid with his fellow-domestics — especially the cook, if she's a good one."

He opened the door that led into the kitchen and found himself in the presence of a large person of obviously Hibernian ancestry. She was plainly a cook, a real cook, and nothing but a cook. She was placidly peeling potatoes, and there was not a

sign of emotion on her red face as she raised her eyes and saw him.

"You'll be the new butler, I'm thinkin'."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, I'm Mrs. O'Malley, the cook."

"I'm very glad to meet you, Mrs. O'Malley," acknowledged Peters politely. With that the conversation hung fire, and to end the pause, the butler thrust his hand into his pocket and brought forth a box of cigarettes. "You don't mind if I smoke?"

She lifted her calm eyes to his.

"If you smoke in my kitchen," she said dispassionately, "I'll clout ye over the head wid a wet dish-cloth."

There was a hiatus of silence.

"Oh," said Peters, and because nothing further suggested itself, and because he really did want a cigarette, he beat an orderly retreat to the pantry and cautiously smoked out the window.

His lungs satisfied, curiosity drove him forth to make a survey of his new home, and he soon decided that he liked it. The rooms were spacious and comfortable, dignified without being stiff, orderly without being unhomelike. His eye lingered fondly on

the well-filled shelves in Jerry Bronson's library, and he wondered if the broker would occasionally lend him a volume to read in his spare moments. . . .

Across the hall, in the drawing-room, he found Julia Shaughnessy polishing a pair of big brass andirons and displaying a marked lack of enthusiasm for her work.

"Let me help you," he volunteered gallantly, and Julia obligingly did. She sat back on her heels and watched the bright yellow metal emerge from its massage of smelly red paste.

"I hate doing brasses," she confided presently.

"Do you? Well, I suppose it will be my job after this."

"Will it? Then it's glad I am that you've come."

She went off about some other duty, and when Peters had finished the andirons, he returned to the pantry with the comfortable feeling that he had endeared himself in a material fashion to at least one of his fellow-servants. The minor success encouraged him to try his luck again with the brandisher of dish-cloths.

Fortune favored him. Mrs. O'Malley was engaged in laboriously removing the skins from a

number of tomatoes, and after watching her for a minute he ventured a suggestion.

"Why don't you put them in boiling water?"

She put down her knife and regarded him stonily.

"An' for why should I be doin' such a silly thing as that?"

"If you put them in boiling water for a few seconds their skins will come off easily."

"Is it jokin' ye are?"

"Of course not. Let me show you."

He filled a saucepan from the steaming kettle, put several tomatoes in the water for a moment or two, and then chilled them again beneath the cold water faucet. She looked on, fascinated, as his deft fingers slipped the skins from the fruit.

"Will ye look at that, now!" she said, and there was warm admiration in her voice. "Sure, I'm much obliged to ye, Mr. Peters — an' me cookin' twenty years without learnin' that simple trick!"

The butler thought it tactful to change to another subject.

"I suppose they'll want mayonnaise with these?" he asked.

"They will that."

"Then if you will show me where the things are, I'll make it."

She was his warm friend from that minute.

Mrs. Bronson turned up for lunch but went out immediately afterward, taking Joan with her. From the conversation at table, Peters gathered that they were going to the Club, the one to play bridge and the other tennis.

He washed the luncheon dishes, with the aid of Julia, who passed the time by giving him many intimate details of the family's private life. He learned that Joan Ayres was a cousin of Mrs. Bronson — a "poor relation" to whom the hospitable pair had given a home for some years, and who partially repaid their kindness by keeping the child, Cicely, in order — and more than repaid it, thought Peters to himself, by her delightful presence in the house. Sidney Durant, in similar fashion, owed his place in the family circle to the fact that his father and mother were both dead and that Jerry Bronson had accepted the responsibility of bringing up his favorite sister's boy. He was now in his twenty-fourth year, "an' powerful wild," said Julia.

The sharp summons of a bell broke in on their

conversation and took the butler off to the front door. He opened it to discover a rather doubtful character, in dilapidated garments, whose breath was redolent of the illicit liquor frequently anathematized as the "demon Rum." He carried an old leather tool-kit in one hand, and he was obviously surprised at the sight of Peters. He stared fixedly at the quality butler and appraised him vaguely.

"You're new, ain't you?" he demanded in husky tones.

"Yes, I'm new. What do you want?"

"I've come to fix the lock on this here door?"

"What's the matter with the lock?"

"How can I tell until I find out?" retorted the man, reasonably enough. He dropped the bag of tools with a thud, and proceeding to divest himself of his dirty coat, revealed an even dirtier shirt. He rolled up the sleeves of this, and Peter noted with fastidious distaste that he had a hideous blue-black mole on the lower part of his left forearm.

"Get on with it, then," ordered the butler sharply. "You'll have all the flies in America in this house if you keep the door open long."

The locksmith gave a contemptuous grunt and commenced work with a screw-driver. Peters withdrew to the purer air of the library, where he hovered about and kept a casual eye on the laborer, who he was convinced was none too sober. He watched the man remove the lock, take it apart, and turn the pieces several times in his hand. A look of indignation came into his ugly face.

"Say," he called out in aggrieved tones. "This here is a Barlow lock, and they told me at the shop I was to fix a Yale!"

"Well, what of it?"

The man put his arms a-kimbo, glanced about him curiously, and then gazed at the butler.

"Look here!" he demanded, in a puzzled minor key, "whose house is this, any way?"

"Mr. Bronson's, of course."

"Huh!" The locksmith returned to his knees and began replacing the plates he had removed. He volunteered a shame-faced explanation. "I thought this was Bristeds'. I'm a bit new to this neighborhood. Can you tell me where they live?"

Peters could not, but Julia appeared on the scene and supplied the desired information. The Bristeds'

was the third house on the right, down the boulevard. The workman completed his task, pulled on his coat, and picked up the leather satchel.

"Sorry to have bothered you, mate," he apologized. "My mistake."

"See you don't make it again," said Peters briskly, and shut the door on the other's retreating back. The illicit aroma passed away with him.

With the exception of this negligible incident the afternoon wore along quietly and monotonously. Toward six o'clock Jerry Bronson reached the house, and as he stood on the porch fumbling in one pocket after another for his latch-key, he was agreeably surprised to have the big door flung open and hear a polite, low-voiced, "Good-evening, sir."

"Ah, Peters!" he said heartily. "So you have arrived? Getting on all right?"

"Oh, yes, sir, thank you."

"Find your room comfortable?"

"Very nice indeed, sir."

Mr. Bronson found himself swiftly relieved of his hat and stick, which the butler, with sure instinct, deposited in a shallow hall-closet.

"Anybody home, Peters?"

"Only Miss Cicely, sir."

The broker took himself to the library, where he settled himself to examine some papers that he had brought home from the office. In a few minutes he was joined by Cicely, a long-limbed, dark-haired child with her mother's coloring and features, who promptly sat herself upon one of his knees — a place where he loved to have her, and where she loved to be. He gave her a hug of greeting.

"Well, my dear, what have you been doing all day?"

"Putting my new doll's-house in order," she answered gravely.

"Fine! Is it all fixed now?"

"Yes, papa. I've got a mother and father doll, two little boy dollies, and two little girls. And there's a cook, and a nurse, and a gardener in the kitchen."

"You've got him placed right! That's where Pietro spends *his* idle hours!"

Cicely's face was screwed up in the throes of thought. "Papa, who is the person in our pantry?"

"Eh? Oh, I see. He's a butler, Cicely. Every well ordered household, my dear, must have a butler."

"A butler." She digested the word slowly. "He's nice. I like him."

"That's right, my dear."

"I must get a butler for my doll's house," decided the child. "It will be very useful." She went off to deliberate upon the new idea.

Peters, in compliance with a hint from Julia, had set the table for four people, but only three sat down when dinner was announced.

"Is Sidney still among the missing?" asked his uncle.

"Apparently," answered Mrs. Bronson with a little frown. "I don't think he even telephoned. . . ." She looked up at the butler, who was at her elbow. "Did any message come from Mr. Durant?"

"That boy is getting to be the limit," declared Jerry crossly. "I suppose he is off on another party."

"Who is it that he finds so fascinating?" asked Joan casually.

"I don't know," replied her cousin.

He did, however, suspect. But he had not told even his wife of the rumors he had heard concerning an attractive chorus girl who was reputed to

be the particular object of Sidney's attentions. While there was a possibility that the story was not true Jerry preferred not to repeat it at home. He hoped against the rumors.

Peter's disappearance into the pantry at that moment gave him a welcome opportunity to change the subject from Sidney's peccadilloes. He caught his wife's eye.

"How do you like him — the new butler?" he asked softly.

"Very much," replied Mrs. Bronson. "He's a blessed relief after Julia."

Peters began to feel a strong urge of curiosity about this young man, Sidney, of whose wildness he had been hearing at intervals during the day. He did not have long to wait for his first glimpse of the family skeleton. It rattled in shortly.

Joan and the Bronsons went to bed about eleven-thirty, and the butler, having made sure that the house was secured, prepared to follow their example. He was just about to extinguish the hall light when he heard the unmistakable sound of a wandering and uncertain key that was seeking the lock of the front door. He hurried to open it, and

a young man, who had apparently been trying to steady the rollicking door with one hand while unlocking it with the other, came in with it. He recovered a doubtful balance with some difficulty. In the shaded light of the hall he looked scarcely more than a boy, with a pale face, a rather weak chin, and a mop of sandy hair that was meant to lie smoothly but was now disordered

"Good-evening, Uncle," said this apparition.

"Good-evening, sir."

A slight flicker of surprise crossed the boy's face.

"Why — you're not Uncle!"

"No, sir."

"Then who the deuce are you?"

"The new butler, sir."

"The new — oh!"

If anything, he took a little longer than Cicely to assimilate this information. Then he drew himself up with a laughable assumption of dignity, opening his eyes wide so that the white showed clear around the iris.

"Quite so. I knew you had changed too much to be Uncle. Er — good-night, butler!"

"Good-night, sir."

The young man achieved a wavering ascent of the stairs. Peters, with impassive face, saw him make the landing in safety before he put out the light.

Then he stood silent in the dark, thoughtfully, for a full minute or two before slipping away noiselessly to his room.

Chapter Four

MAYBELLE OF THE REVELS

A WEEK later Jerry Bronson and his partner were seated in the former's office going over the morning mail — which at first did not seem likely to produce anything worthy of comment. There were the usual number of circulars from other brokers, the usual number of checks in payment of rent or interest charges, the usual letter from the gentleman with a goat-pasture in Yonkers, who was willing to "sacrifice" it at Times Square prices — Suddenly Jerry gave a little exclamation of impatience as he picked up a long blue envelope.

"S'matter?" asked the Bartlett Pear.

"It's an ad. from a detective agency," grunted his companion. "Why in the world they want to circularize me — !" He shook his head sadly over people who would thus waste their money and his time, and dropped the missive unopened in the trash-basket beside him.

His partner, idly curious, rescued and opened it.

"'Traynor, Foster and Henderson,'" he read. "'Private inquiry agents. Investigations conducted with the greatest secrecy. Maximum of service with the minimum of publicity'—how those fellows do love that phrase!—'No case too large or too small.' Say, Jerry, do you suppose they could find that fountain pen I lent you last Tuesday?"

"That's the third card they have sent me," said Jerry, still complaining. He felt in his breast pocket, discovered the missing pen by a rare stroke of good fortune, and silently returned it to its marveling owner. "They must spend a fortune on stationery and stamps, and I'm shot if I can see why. Advertising can do wonders I know, but it can't create a demand for a private detective."

Bartlett put his pen in his pocket, and dropped the circular back in the basket. Meanwhile Jerry had found a pale pink *billet-doux* that smelt strongly of perfume and was addressed to him personally. He tore it open, wrinkling his nose disdainfully as a fresh wave of scent was wafted upward, and mastered its contents in a few seconds.

He gave a sharp, choking gasp as he finished, and Bartlett, glancing at him quickly, was startled to see that his face was white and strained and that he was leaning back in his chair as if faint, his eyes half shut, and the perfumed note clenched in his hand.

"Jerry! What is it?"

Bronson drew a long breath, expelled it slowly, and partially regained his self-control.

"I'll tell you what it is," he answered in a low, hard voice. "It's a letter from a young woman who signs herself 'Maybelle Minnedinker' and who wants me to give her twenty-five hundred dollars or face certain unpleasant consequences!"

"Phew!" The Bartlett Pear's eyebrows tilted sharply. "My word, Jerry, what have you been doing? Who is Maybelle — er — Upsedaisy, and how have you damaged her to the extent of twenty-five hundred?"

"Don't be an ass, Henry," said the senior partner with righteous asperity. "I haven't done anything to the girl — or any girl. Here, read the thing for yourself. Read it aloud! I'd be sorry to think I'd missed anything."

Bartlett obeyed, stumbling now and then over the bold and brave samples of a dashing handwriting that was apparently evolved from the Runic.

"My dear Mr. Bronson: I cannot tell you how distressed I am to have to approach you on a matter that is causing me serious concern, but circumstances compel me to turn to you for assistance. Briefly, I lent to your nephew, Mr. Durant, some months ago, the sum of twenty-five hundred dollars. He gave me his note for the amount, and payment is now long overdue. He tells me that he cannot repay me, although I have repeatedly threatened him with legal proceedings, and, as I am in desperate need of the money, I have decided to appeal to you to settle the matter. I am sure you will do this in preference to incurring the unpleasant notoriety that must follow upon my obtaining a judgment against Mr. Durant in open court. I am naturally anxious to know your answer, so I will call at your office to-morrow afternoon at four o'clock. If you are obliged to be absent at that hour, may I hope that you will leave a note for me — preferably containing a check? Believe me, dear Mr. Bronson, sincerely yours,

"MAYBELLE MINNEDINKER."

"Wow!" Bartlett tossed the letter on the desk, and the two men stared at each other in dismay. "The blackmailing hussy!" he added vigorously.

"I suppose so," answered his partner gloomily. "But what can you expect of a chorus girl who's out for twenty-five hundred?"

"Is she a chorus girl?"

"I assume so."

"'Minnedinker?'" demurred Bartlett. "It's tuneful but hardly chorus. It fairly jingles — like a gold coin."

"Oh, I dare say she uses her real name for business purposes."

"True." The Pear glanced at the note once more. "Four o'clock to-morrow afternoon. That's to-day. You surely won't fall for such an outrageous demand, will you, Jerry?"

"I don't know."

"What are you going to say to her?"

"I don't know."

"Well — but — you *are* going to see her, aren't you?"

"I don't know, Henry."

Consternation spread over Bartlett's ample coun-

tenance — consternation that deepened as he looked at his partner and noted the genuine misery in his staring eyes. It came to him suddenly that Jerry was much less troubled by the blackmailing hussy's letter than he was by this fresh evidence of his nephew's wildness. Moved by a quick rush of sympathy, Bartlett struggled erect stepped towards his friend, and dropped a pair of heavy hands on the despondent shoulders.

"Say, Jerry, shall I see her for you?"

"I'd appreciate it, Henry."

"The question is, what do you want me to tell her?"

"I don't know."

Bartlett opened his mouth to protest against the reiterated expression of uncertainty, but was abruptly seized with inspiration.

"I know," he said cheerfully. "We won't tell her anything. We will not commit ourselves. We will listen to what she has to say, and will advise her of our decision at a subsequent date."

"Henry," said Jerry Bronson with deep foreboding, "she is a chorus girl, not a business man. She will want quick action."

"Well, I can't help that!" retorted Bartlett. "You surely don't expect me to open champagne for her, do you?"

"I'm sure whatever you do will be right." Bronson fluttered his thinning locks with a vagrant hand. "I've stood a good deal from Sidney, but this is the last straw."

"I wonder what he's been up to?" mused the Pear.

"I don't know, and I hardly care. Mary and I are both fond of the boy, as you know, and we've brought him up like a son. But apparently he's a bad egg. Of course one expects a bad egg to sow a certain amount of wild oats," he continued, vaguely confused by the mixed figure of speech, "but Sidney's crop has exceeded the human limit. How many wild oats can a bad egg sow?"

Bartlett, able to look at the situation from a more neutral viewpoint, interposed a mild objection to this zoological and cereal combination. He had always liked Sidney, and although this new entanglement appeared to be rather an unsavory one he still hoped that some mitigating facts might come to light.

"There must be some good in the boy, Jerry. He couldn't hold on to a responsible job with a big insurance company if he didn't have some brains."

"Superficial cleverness!" snapped the irate uncle.

"Superficial? Huh! Did you ever try to borrow twenty-five hundred from a chorus girl — and get it?"

Mr. Bronson had never achieved this financial triumph.

"Well, then! No more of your superficial cleverness! And, now, Jerry, buck up! Leave the fair Minnedinker to your Uncle Henry, and don't go crossing bridges until you're sure you've come to them — especially when the toll is twenty-five hundred simoleons; and a chorus girl is the bridge tender."

A brisk real estate business has its exacting moods, and both the partners were compelled by sheer necessity to turn their attention to more pressing matters than Sidney and his troubles. Bad eggs and wild oats are all right in their proper place — but business is business.

The partners, still talking shop, lunched together. The forced distraction from his domestic anxieties

was probably the best thing in the world for Jerry Bronson; he slowly threw off the shock he had received in reading Maybelle's letter, and while still talking real estate, in the back of his brain there formed the ghost of an idea that he might yet turn this incident to good account in furthering one of his keenest ambitions. Alone in his office, after lunch, he arrived at a decision with the help of a big black cigar, and summoning the boy, asked Mr. Bartlett to step in for a moment.

"Henry, I've been thinking. . . . About this interview of yours with Miss — er — Minnedinker. . . ."

"Yes, Jerry?"

"I suppose, in the end, I shall have to pay her. He'll be in the deuce of a hole if I don't — "

"Hold on!" protested Bartlett. "After all, we have yet to hear the boy's own story."

Jerry had very little hope that it would be edifying. "I guess she's telling the truth — or mostly so, anyway. But, as I was saying, if I don't come to his rescue he'll be in a sweet mess." He sat for several minutes revolving brisk thoughts. Then he tapped his knee gently and cast a look full of mean-

ing at his partner. "It might not be a bad idea to give him a bit of a scare — eh?"

"What do you mean?"

"I could dash Miss Maybelle's hopes with a flat refusal to give up a cent, and then let him know that I've done so. When he has had a week or two of worry, I can intervene. It will always be easy enough to choke her off before she can start any proceedings, and it may be that a dose of real anxiety will stiffen Master Sidney's virtue — if he has any."

"Rather a desperate remedy," commented Bartlett thoughtfully.

"It's rather a desperate disease," said Bronson grimly, "and I'm getting to be a pretty desperate doctor."

Bartlett's brow cleared as he considered the proposal. "I believe you're right, Jerry. I've always taken the boy's part, but I agree with you that he has gone too far and must be brought up with a round turn. It is possible that your idea of scaring him may accomplish what all your kindness hasn't. Shall I talk to her, then, along those lines?"

"If you please, Henry."

A few minutes before four, Jerry left the office; at

four o'clock to the dot the red-headed office boy appeared before Mr. Bartlett with the information that a lady was asking for Mr. Bronson.

"Show her in here, Jimmy."

"Yes, sir."

The Bartlett Pear adopted his sternest and most dignified air, and, as a finishing touch, put on a pair of glasses, heavily rimmed with gold, which he never wore except on state occasions, and which he fondly believed lent him an awesome dignity and impressiveness. He fastened a grim eye on the door of his office.

The vision of beauty that presently floated into view did not appear to be impressed either by the dignified manner or the stern gaze — which latter lost much of its severity as it rested upon one of the most beautiful members of the classiest front row in New York. She was a tall, well-built young woman who radiated a superb self-confidence from every inch of her, from her small feet to her glory of golden hair — hair of a hue so chemically perfect that a new double-eagle resting on its soft masses would have seemed but tarnished dross, a thing of no current value whatever. Her slim figure

was clad in a dark blue suit whose fashionable brevity revealed about eighteen inches of the most shapely blue silk stockings in the city. Her feet were shod in suede slippers of the same color, her small hat carried out the scheme to perfection, but no part or parcel of her costume could compare for blueness with the large eyes that gazed upon the Bartlett Pear unafraid. For the rest of her appearance, it need only be said that she had just been engaged for the "Summer Revels" at a figure as pleasing as her own.

The Pear rose and made obeisance twice; once outwardly to her, and once inwardly to Sidney's taste, which he decided had been underestimated. He drew up a chair with one hand and reached for a dark blue parasol with the other, but this she refused to relinquish. She sat down rather stiffly and fixed him with an accusing gaze.

"You are not Mr. Bronson?"

"No. Mr. Bronson was obliged to leave early to-day and has asked me to represent him with you."

"Oh!" Her blue eyes dropped to the tip of her parasol, which made a sharp, squeaky noise

as she absently rubbed it against the base of Mr. Bartlett's desk. "Oh, I see!"

If there was any innuendo in either her words or voice, it was lost entirely upon Bartlett. Of all things on earth, he objected most to sharp squeaky noises; the explosion of a dynamite cartridge in the next room, if it left him at all, would have left him calm, but a sharp, squeaky noise played havoc with his spine and rasped his whole body to the marrow of his bones. He shivered now, and eyed the offending parasol resentfully.

"In a way," continued Miss Minnedinker, checking her restless weapon, to his great relief, "in a way I'm rather glad. It is really easier to discuss these — these embarrassing matters with someone not personally involved. I am sure I shall find you a *most* delightful substitute!"

Without warning, she hurled at him her most effective, man-taming smile, which, sad to say, was woefully wasted upon this occasion. Her intended victim was shifting nervously from side to side at his desk and watching her parasol with the same trepidation that a sufferer in the dentist's chair watches the shining instrument in the hand of his

torturer, and he recalled his attention with something of an effort.

"Oh — er — certainly, by all means!" he stammered. "Now, you see, your letter left a few things unexplained that Mr. Bronson would like to know more about. . . ."

"Yes?" answered the lady graciously. "I am sure I'll be delighted."

"Well, let me see — you know Mr. Durant quite well, I suppose?"

"Oh, no," corrected the girl in her clear, fresh voice. "I never lend twenty-five hundred dollars except to strangers."

"Um! And, just what was the nature of the loan?"

"Cash," she answered briefly, and added sorrowfully, "the hard-earned savings of a poor working girl."

A lingering squeak came from the parasol; Mr. Bartlett unclenched his teeth as it subsided, and resumed his questioning.

"You misunderstand me. I meant for what purpose did you lend Mr. Durant the money, and on what terms?"

"To play a tip on the market," she answered sadly. "Six months at six per cent."

"Ah." A legitimate action if a foolish one; he could find no reason to quarrel with her on that score, so he trained his batteries on a weaker spot. "You realize, of course, that your letter to Mr. Bronson was in the nature of a threat for the purpose of extorting money? Perhaps you are aware that the law has an unpleasant name for that."

"Blackmail," she agreed sweetly, "but of so mild a character that no judge would condemn me."

"You may be given an opportunity to learn whether that is so or not." The Bartlett Pear felt he was not distinguishing himself, and decided to bring matters to a head. "Mr. Bronson, I may tell you, is a man of great resolution — very great resolution and firmness. Exceptional firmness. A hard man, my dear young lady. I fear he is not disposed to hand over twenty-five hundred dollars to pay for a piece of foolishness on the part of his nephew, and I assure you in all friendliness that you are probably wasting your time in trying to collect Sidney's debts from his uncle. You will not find Mr. Bronson an 'easy mark,' as they call it."

The parasol squeaked furiously. Mr. Bartlett prayed for strength.

"I think," said the girl slowly, describing little circles against the desk, "I think (*squeak*) that Mr. Bronson is very ill-advised to take such an attitude (*squeak-squeak*) in this matter. He must know that in order (*squeak*) to protect myself I will be compelled to secure a judgment against Mr. Durant. That means publicity (*squeak-squeak*) which cannot fail to injure the young man's reputation (*squeak*) and his prospects (*squeak*) with the company that employs him. In the circumstances, I believe Mr. Bronson would prefer to (*sque-e-e-ak*) —"

"Don't do that!" cried Mr. Bartlett in agony.

She regarded him with open eyes. "Don't do *what?*"

"Squeak! With your parasol, I mean. I can't stand it!"

"Gracious! Do you mean — this?" (*Squeak*) She watched the writhings of her victim with deep interest, and, to better appreciate such a curious reaction, she mauled his nerves with one final, satisfying, excruciating squeak while she watched

him quiver. "How funny! I suppose you are nervous? I never am myself," she added consolingly. Then her voice became more business-like. "However, this is interesting, but it isn't getting us anywhere. Please tell Mr. Bronson for me that I am very much in earnest and will do exactly as I say. I will give him just one week to come through with the cash."

Mr. Bartlett flushed indignantly. She had tried him too far already.

"Is that an ultimatum?" he snapped.

"A what?"

"An ultimatum — a final definite statement of your purpose."

"Absolutely!"

"In that case," said the Pear with great deliberation, "I'm authorized to inform you, here and now, that Mr. Bronson refuses to have anything more to do with you. You will have to depend upon Mr. Durant to repay your loan."

She sprang to her feet, an outraged goddess in blue. Her eyes flashed fire.

"In-*deed!* Well, let me tell *you* that Mr. Bronson never said any such thing! I know from Sidney

that he is much too kind and gentle to treat a poor girl so mean! That's why he got *you* to see me! When it came to a bit of dirty work he had to employ a sneaking, stingy, stodgy, hard-hearted, brainless, bald-headed old *crab.*" She swept him from head to foot with a withering glance, took a long breath, and expelled it in one violent epithet: "*Pig!*"

The Bartlett Pear bounded to his feet with a purple face.

"L-l-l-look here!" he stammered, between little choking sounds of wrath. "Look here, Miss Minnie Maybelledinger —"

She swung on her heel and marched swiftly from the office, her face and form eloquent of fury. But even in her tempestuous anger she remembered to trail the parasol heavily along the floor where it squeaked, squeaked, squeaked, while the Bartlett Pear clapped his hands to his ears and suffered.

Chapter Five

MR. BRONSON IS FIRM

JERRY, driven from his office by the fearsome advent of the fair Miss Minnedinker, took the first train for Claredale. He found, as he had half expected, an empty house. Joan was playing tennis, his wife was at the club, presumably playing bridge, and Cicely was attending a birthday party somewhere. Jerry sighed, and betook himself into the library to work on some rent-rolls that he had brought home with him.

He was glad when the sharp summons of the telephone at five o'clock gave him an excuse to thrust the papers aside. His partner's voice came over the wire, and he listened with absorbed interest while the Bartlett Pear gave a slightly edited account of his interview with the blackmailing hussy.

"You made it clear to her that there was nothing doing?" asked Bronson. "Fine, Henry! That is just the line I wanted you to take! I am sure she

will report the result to Sidney, and then we'll see if he can be scared into behaving himself!" He brought the conversation to a close with a few heartfelt words of gratitude.

When he had hung up the receiver, he touched an electric button.

"Peters, have you received any message to-day from my nephew?"

"Mr. Durant 'phoned, sir, just before you came in. He does not expect to be home for dinner, sir, but will be here later."

"Thank you, Peters. That's all."

When the butler had gone, Jerry hunted through the drawers of his desk until he discovered an old pipe that he reserved for his more serious moods of reflection. He had filled and smoked it twice, and determined that no matter how late Sidney might be in returning he would find an irate guardian awaiting him, when the sound of a latch-key in the front door, followed by the subject of his thoughts in person, aroused him to the fact that he was even now on the threshold of the interview that he dreaded.

"Good-evening, Uncle!" said Sidney, a shade

too heartily. "Isn't this rather early for you to be home?"

"Speak for yourself, my boy! As a matter of fact, I was expecting you to be late; didn't you telephone that you would not be home for dinner?"

"Yes," admitted his nephew. "I was supposed to dine with some chaps in town, but I changed my plans."

He lighted a cigarette, took several nervous puffs at it, and threw it impatiently into the fireplace. The action, simple though it was, indicated clearly his frame of mind; he avoided his uncle's eye while he took two or three turns about the room, but finally, with the air of summoning all his courage, he halted in front of Jerry and plunged into the matter that weighed upon them both.

"I understand, sir, that you have just been informed of my last bit of assininity."

"Your *last?*" Mr. Bronson raised questioning eyebrows. "I've little hope that it's that, Sidney; but if you mean your latest, and if you mean Maybelle, I can say that I have."

"She called me up and said she'd talked with Bartlett," confessed the young man. "She has

threatened several times to go to you, but I never dreamed that she'd do it." He lighted another cigarette and meditated a moment. "Not that I blame her at all; twenty-five hundred dollars must make a pretty big hole in her nest-egg."

"Or any one else's," added Jerry, not without some feeling. Sidney had the grace to flush. "If I'm not being too personal, may I ask the size of your own nest-egg at present — in cash?"

"One hundred and thirty-seven dollars and sixty-three cents," replied his nephew promptly — and he derived small comfort from the grunt with which his uncle acknowledged the figures.

"Suppose you sit down, Sidney, and tell me the history of your indebtedness to Miss Minnedinker. If there is anything particularly disgraceful about it, I will guarantee to keep the knowledge from the family."

"Oh, it's not as bad as that, sir. The truth is, I saw a chance to make a nice little pot of money if I could lay my hands on enough capital to take advantage of my knowledge. I have known Miss Minnedinker for quite awhile, and when I happened to mention my needs in her hearing one day, she

immediately offered to lend me the twenty-five hundred — on terms, of course."

"What were they?"

"We agreed to act as partners, she putting in her money against my information; we were to split the profits fifty-fifty."

"And the losses?"

"There weren't going to be any losses," answered Sidney, and in spite of his chastened mood, he could not restrain a mirthless grin. "That is how I came to fall in with her suggestion that I give her my personal note for the amount I borrowed."

"Didn't it occur to you that it was a case of heads she won, tails you lost?"

"It did, but I was so confident —" he broke off with a shrug of his shoulders.

"In what new and graceful shape did this latest gold-brick appear before you? They are much varied in form and in manner of presentation, but they all resolve themselves finally into one form — about ten inches by two and four, and well gilded on the outside. I hope you have at least observed the promise you made me a year ago that you would do no more gambling?"

"Of course I have, sir! This was no gambling proposition; it was a perfectly straight tip on a sound Wall Street stock. If the whole silly market hadn't skidded . . ."

Jerry Bronson raised anguished eyes to Heaven.

"Oh, no — that isn't gambling! Wall Street never is — any more than Monte Carlo, or a horse-race! We all know that. So you took this woman's money for a little flyer in stocks — and then what?"

"Well, it flew all right," admitted Sidney, and again his lips shaped themselves into a smile more tragic than tears.

"You have had time since then, I suppose, to reflect that the sum you owe the young lady represents approximately eight months of your salary?"

"Seven months and twenty-three days, to be exact, sir! I have figured it several times."

"Have you any other resources?"

"No, sir."

"It appears to me that your affairs are somewhat seriously involved. How do you expect to get out of this mess?"

"I was hoping you could suggest something, sir."

"Oh."

"If you could find it convenient to give me the twenty-five hundred to take up that note, I might repay you by giving you half my salary until the debt is wiped out."

"Humph! I thought Bartlett made himself pretty clear on that point to Miss Minnedinker."

"I — I don't think I understand, sir."

"Didn't she tell you the result of her talk with Bartlett?"

"No. She just called up to say that she'd gone to you as she had threatened, and then she hung up with a bang. She seemed peeved. . . ."

Jerry Bronson nerved himself to pronounce a thumping untruth for the boy's own good. He cleared his throat, resolutely kept his hands from his hair, and tried to look as stern as Draco and as inexorable as a Mede and Persian — or a bank cashier.

"She had some cause to be angry. Mr. Bartlett, acting under my instructions, told her that I would do nothing toward paying your note, that she must look only to you for redress. You know, Sidney,

that I have borne with you long and patiently, and I feel that you might have behaved toward me as if you appreciated it — but there, I did not mean to speak of that, for it is a point you can settle with your own conscience. I do, however, refuse to foot any more bills to get you out of your senseless scrapes — and I'm going to start now! You must manage to square Miss Minnedinker by your own efforts, or face the consequences of your folly like a man."

Sidney's face was white as his uncle finished speaking; his eyes were cast down, and the cigarette between his fingers shook with the trembling of his hands.

"I'm afraid Maybelle has made up her mind to sue me," he muttered. "That's going to put a crimp in my prospects with the Universal; they may not fire me, but they'll be darned careful how they promote me."

To this melancholy prediction Jerry Bronson could find nothing to say except the age-old retort of the consciously righteous: "You should have thought of that before, Sidney! One bit of forethought is worth a hundred bits of afterthought."

The lines tightened about the boy's mouth. "Am I to consider your decision as final, sir?"

Mr. Bronson was secretly glad that his nephew had phrased it so happily.

"That is exactly the way I want you to consider it," he answered firmly.

"Then," said Sidney, in a voice so low that he might have been talking to himself, "I must get out of this mess in any way I can."

"I wish you luck, my boy," responded Bronson more gently. He gave a sigh. "If I could only believe that this would teach you a lesson — !"

Sidney did not look up as he answered. "You can rest assured of that, sir. After this, you will have no further cause for anxiety on my account."

The words by themselves were fair enough, but Jerry Bronson was inwardly perturbed by the tone in which they were uttered. He shot a scrutinizing glance at the speaker, but the boy's eyes were still fixed on the floor, and his expressionless face gave no clue to his thoughts.

"I sincerely trust —" The broker cut short his sentence as Joan Ayres came through the doorway from the hall.

"Hello, Cousin Jerry! Busy?"

"Good afternoon, my dear." He was pleased with her intrusion, ending as it did the disagreeable interview with Sidney. "No, we're not busy; come in and tell me what you've been doing with yourself."

"Not much time for that, I'm afraid. Have you forgotten that the Derwins are coming to dinner? That means my very best dress, which is also the hardest to get into."

"Great Scott!" Bronson looked at his watch and sprang to his feet. "I *had* forgotten! Don't talk to me about your sartorial trials, Joan; be grateful you have no stiff shirt or high collar to worry you!"

He fled the room. Joan lighted a cigarette, perched herself on a corner of her cousin's safe, and regarded the gloomy Sidney with a contemplative eye.

"Why is our noble brow thus mantled with dull care?"

"Oh — I'm in dutch."

"Still, or again?"

"Again." He moved restlessly in his seat, im-

patient under her questioning, though he had the best of reasons to know that Joan did not ask out of idleness.

"Well," she went on, a little drily, "I suppose Cousin Jerry is ready to throw out the life-line as usual, isn't he?"

"No. He has turned me down — hard."

"Question of money, of course?"

"Of course," he echoed bitterly.

Joan flicked an ash from her cigarette and studied the tips of her tennis shoes. She had told Sidney more than once what she thought of his conduct, but on the other hand she had come to his aid on occasion in very practical fashion — and it should be said to his credit that such loans as she had made to him in his hours of need had always been scrupulously repaid. She prepared now to don the familiar robe of Good Samaritan.

"Can I give you a lift, Sid?"

"Thanks, Joan." He managed a grateful smile. "I'm afraid the ante's a bit too stiff for you to sit in."

"How much is it?"

"Twenty-five hundred."

"Ouch!" said Joan, and almost dropped her cigarette. She looked at him in frank dismay. "Whatever will you do?"

"Hanged if I know," he answered sulkily. "I've as much chance of raising twenty-five million as twenty-five hundred, unless," he added with a short laugh, "I take a can-opener and bust into that tin safe you're sitting on! I expect Uncle Jerry's rubies would melt down to what I need."

Joan frowned. She tossed her cigarette into an ash-tray and slipped to the floor before speaking again.

"That is a type of silly remark that I particularly despise. It doesn't mean anything, and it is just asking for trouble. Don't you know that if anyone burgled the safe to-night, I'd be the star witness for the prosecution to-morrow morning?"

"Nonsense, Joan!" He stood up. "You're much too good a sport to give me away like that! Well, I'm off to prepare for the dear Derwin invasion."

The Derwins, a healthy looking couple with excellent appetites, arrived punctually at the time appointed and were warmly received by their hostess,

who considered that their presence at her dinner-table marked a notable advance in her policy of peaceful penetration into the upper circles of Claredale society. Her triumph made her radiant, and her eyes sparkled as brightly as the handsome rubies that she wore.

She noticed during dinner that her guests glanced at them more than once, and she was not surprised when Mrs. Derwin finally spoke of them.

"What lovely rubies! Are they new, or are they heirlooms?"

"Some are old and some are new. My husband is very fond of rubies, and when he sees any that he particularly likes he gets them for me." She held out her arm. "This bracelet is the latest acquisition!"

"I'm awfully fond of them myself," said Mrs. Derwin after she had sufficiently admired the bracelet, "but unfortunately they are not at all becoming to me." She suddenly noticed that her host had caught the word rubies and was smiling at her. "You must have a lot of fun selecting such beautiful things, Mr. Bronson — and I think your taste is wonderful!"

"Rubies have a fascination for me," he admitted. "Yes, I do enjoy shopping for them whenever I get a good excuse. I am looking forward now to making a tour of the ruby markets in search of a stone that I need."

"Need?"

"Yes. A few months ago I picked up a remarkably fine unset ruby, and now I am looking for a mate to it in order to have the two made into earrings."

"I envy you your task," sighed Mrs. Derwin.

He beamed his recognition of a kindred spirit.

"Would you like to see the one I'm trying to match?"

"Oh, I'd love to!"

He rose promptly and went into the library. He was back in a minute with his treasure, which he laid in Mrs. Derwin's outstretched palm, where it settled like a big drop of liquid flame. She gazed upon it with little exclamations of wonder, and reluctantly parted with it to her husband, who admired it no less than she.

"Can I see it?" asked Joan, who sat next to him.

Derwin started to place it in her slender hand, but his fingers incautiously released their grip too soon and the stone fell. Joan made a quick attempt to catch it, but she only succeeded in striking it with the back of her hand and knocking it some feet behind her. It was retrieved by the alert Peters.

The butler had his back turned to the table as he stooped for the ruby, and Jerry Bronson, keeping a careful eye on the wanderings of his crimson treasure, was surprised at Peters' manner of handling the jewel. It seemed to Jerry that the man was a long time straightening up, as though he were taking a good look at the ruby, and he could have sworn that he weighed it appraisingly as it rested an instant in his palm. In another moment Bronson's favorite jewel was restored to his keeping, and he tucked it away in his waistcoat pocket.

The incident slipped from his mind, but he recalled it later when the guests had departed and he was putting away the set that his wife had worn.

"I don't know much about butlers," he mused, as he turned the knob of the safe and felt the handle

to make sure that it was locked, " but I'm reasonably sure that one doesn't expect them to be connoisseurs of rubies." A dark thought crossed his mind. " Heaven send he's not a crook," he murmured piously.

Chapter Six

McKITTRICK'S RUBY

THAT night Jerry Bronson noted the fact that, while a guilty conscience may prevent sleep, a clear one does not induce it. Thanks to the lingering presence of the Derwins, he had had no further conversation with Sidney during the evening, but, after he was in bed, the broker found himself haunted by the memory of the earlier interview in the library; his restless brain dwelt continually on the tone of voice in which his nephew had made his last despairing remark. He would have given a good deal to know whether the words meant more than the manner of their utterance, whether he had heard a promise of better things or a threat of worse.

Yet his conscience did not reproach him. He had acted after due deliberation, and he still thought himself entirely justified in refusing to pour

unlimited money into the bottomless well of Sidney's extravagance; but he knew that if the boy did anything rash as a result of his well-intentioned firmness, he would never forgive himself. It was small consolation to the broker, tossing from one side of his bed to the other, to reflect that he intended to come to the rescue eventually.

He got to sleep at last on the comforting idea that he would talk to Sidney in the morning and ask him to explain exactly what he had meant by his bothersome remark. But, as it turned out, Jerry did not get this opportunity to set his mind at rest. He entered the dining-room to find the table set only for himself, and learned from Peters that Sidney had swallowed a cup of coffee and bolted for an earlier train than he was in the habit of taking. Jerry sighed for another good intention gone where good intentions are reputed to go, and divided his attention equably between breakfast and the morning paper, while Peters functioned smoothly between the pantry and the table.

Jerry had laid aside his paper and was just commencing his second cup of coffee when the butler spoke.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but there is something I'd like to say to you, sir."

"Go ahead, Peters."

"It's about that ruby — the one you showed last night, sir."

Bronson looked up from his coffee, and there came to him a disagreeable reminder of a suspicion that had crossed his mind the night before while locking his safe. He frowned slightly.

"What about it, Peters?"

"Only this, sir, that when I picked it off the floor it struck me as being exactly like one that Mr. McKittrick has. I should say, sir, that the stones were identical."

"That is very interesting — very interesting indeed. I imagine though that you are mistaken; the chances are overwhelmingly against such an exact likeness, and only an expert could be sure of such a thing without placing the stones together."

"That is true, sir, and of course I'm not an expert."

There was a faint hint of hesitancy about the butler's manner, and Jerry brought him to the point with some abruptness.

"You have some reason for mentioning this to me, Peters; what is in your mind?"

"I was thinking, sir, of what you said about trying to find a mate for yours. I know Mr. McKittrick would be glad to sell his ruby if he could get anything like a fair price for it, so I thought I would tell you about it."

"I see!" The broker felt the thrill of a collector who scents a new specimen. "But I don't quite understand how it helps me; McKittrick has gone to California, hasn't he?"

"Yes, sir."

"And won't be back until autumn?"

"No, sir."

"While I want to find the second ruby and have the ear-rings made in time for Mrs. Bronson's birthday in August!"

"If you'd like to see the ruby, sir, I think it could be managed."

"How? I don't suppose McKittrick will come all the way across the continent just to show me a ruby that may be like mine?"

"Oh, no, sir!" The butler permitted himself to smile discreetly. "I was going on to say, sir, that

his jewelry is in a secret place in his apartment, along with his silver. But he never had any secrets from me, sir, and if you so desired I could very easily bring you the stone to examine."

"Why — I couldn't listen to such a thing!" Astonishment, decision, and something of wrath were mingled in Bronson's outburst. "Neither you nor I have the right to touch a valuable jewel belonging to another man!"

"I quite understand that it's unusual, sir," answered the butler respectfully, "but, under the circumstances, I am sure that Mr. McKittrick would have me do just what I've suggested."

"Circumstances? What circumstances?"

"Er — Mr. McKittrick's, sir!" The butler smiled again. "Of course I cannot talk too much about his affairs, but I may say that he is very anxious to dispose of some of his jewelry and would have done so before now if he could have got a decent offer. Mr. McKittrick has always been very good to me and I'd like to do him a good turn if I could, and when I gathered from your remarks last night that I might be able to help you too, sir, it — it seemed only right to speak!"

"Mm. Just so. I'm sure you mean well, Peters, but the scheme is out of the question. Anyway, as I have said, it is most improbable that the stones are really alike."

"Yes, sir."

"I could not permit you to take such a risk with another man's property. Especially as the chances are a hundred to one against the two rubies being the same shade."

"Yes, sir."

Silence ensued. Jerry returned to his coffee, and Peters sedately withdrew to a corner of the room. But from time to time the broker glanced at the butler, and from time to time the butler glanced at the broker, until finally their eyes met.

"Er — Peters!"

"Yes, sir."

"About that ruby — you're *quite* sure Mr. McKittrick would approve your letting me see it?"

"Perfectly, sir. I think he'd be very glad, and I don't believe any harm would come from my bringing it here to show you. I could go for it this afternoon, sir, and take it back to-morrow morning if you'd prefer it that way."

The broker's conscience had battled with the collector's passion and lost a fight against heavy odds.

"Very well," said Jerry severely. "On that understanding, you may bring it out and show it to me this evening, but whether it matches or not, it must absolutely go back to Mr. McKittrick's safe to-morrow morning."

"Of course, sir."

"I'll tell Mrs. Bronson that you are going to town after lunch. You'll be back in plenty of time before dinner?"

"Oh, yes, sir!"

Jerry let it go at that, not without some inward qualms.

As soon as the butler had served lunch, he broke the news to Julia that hers was to be the pleasure of doing the dishes single-handed, and betook himself forthwith to the station. When the train arrived, he settled himself in the smoking-car and prepared to enjoy a well-worn pipe that he drew from an inner pocket. It rather annoyed him when a young man, whom he had noticed on the Claredale platform, slipped into the seat beside him. And it annoyed him further that the man made up to him.

"Aren't you the new man at Bronson's?" asked the stranger with courtly politeness.

"Yes."

"I thought you were. My name is Jackson, and I'm second man at the Lathams'."

"Glad to meet you," acknowledged the butler after an instant of uncertainty. He added, "My name is Peters."

"It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to our midst," said Mr. Jackson. "I trust we shall see something of you now and again?"

"Delighted," murmured Peters.

"What is your evening off?"

"Thursdays, and alternate Sundays," answered Peters, and then hastened to forestall the invitation he saw gleaming in Mr. Jackson's eye. "Most of the time I have to go to New York." He added after an almost imperceptible pause, "Got a sick mother."

"That is indeed too bad," said the courtly one, "but I shall hope to see something of you when the old lady's health permits."

Mr. Jackson drifted to other subjects, and being of a talkative turn he did not resent it when he

presently had a monopoly of the conversation. He gave some rather racy sketches of Claredale society, the source of many of his anecdotes being one Henry, the chief steward of the country club.

"A rare fellow, Henry!" he cried admiringly. "Full of life and fun. You can bet nothing gets by him!"

"Indeed."

"Yep. Come to think of it, it was only last evening he was telling me some yarn about your Mrs. Bronson and my people."

"Yes?"

"You know, these dames play for pretty high stakes at the club. Putting together what Henry told me and what I've heard in our dining-room, I guess your Missus must owe my bunch a cool two thousand bucks."

"Owes it?" Peters was surprised out of his indifference. "Do you mean to say she doesn't pay up when she loses?"

"Doesn't look like it, does it? Guess her little old dress allowance can't be stretched over too many rubbers."

"But surely Mr. Bronson has plenty of money?"

"I heard something about that, too," said Jackson, slightly closing a knowing eye. "It seems old Bronson is dead set against gambling, and while he doesn't object to bridge in moderation he'd take the roof off the house if he had to settle wifie's losses for two thou."

The complete conversationalist rambled off to other fields, and Peters, between monosyllabic answers, pondered this side-light on his employers' affairs. If Jackson's story was true — and no doubt it was — it would explain one or two things that had puzzled him. Mrs. Bronson was always cheerful, sometimes with a gaiety that the butler suspected was forced, in the presence of her husband; at other times she habitually appeared moody and depressed. Once, surprising them as they talked on the veranda, he had discovered Mrs. Bronson and Joan in an emotional scene; the girl had been flushed and severe, the older woman dissolved in tears. "I know I ought to, Joan," she sobbed, "but I haven't got the courage!" So much he had heard before the realization of his presence startled Mrs. Bronson into silence.

It appeared evident to him now that Joan must

have been urging her cousin to confide her troubles to her husband. It was the sort of straight-forward, common-sense action that a girl like Joan would advise. If there was one thing that struck a man about Joan, mused the butler, it was her honesty, her courage. He was still elaborating this point in his mind when the train puffed into the terminus. . . .

Bronson was detained at the office that afternoon. He did not get home until a few moments before the dinner hour, bearing with him a small, leather case full of papers that he proposed to work over during the evening. Between the lateness of the hour, which had forced him to hurry, and the importance of the business that obsessed his thoughts, he forgot the matter of McKittrick's ruby until dinner was nearly over. Then the memory recurred to him, and he looked up quickly from his salad.

"By the way, Peters, did you get that ruby?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where is it?"

"Right here, sir."

The butler slipped his hand into the side pocket

of his coat, produced a small white box, and laid it in Bronson's eager hand. Jerry lifted the lid, and gave a cry of surprise and delight.

"By George, Peters, I do believe you're right!" He peered long and lovingly at the big red stone that gleamed up at him from its nest of cotton-wool. "Here, Sidney, pass this to your aunt while I get the other ruby from the safe."

Sidney, who had heard nothing of the second stone and was rather startled by the casual appearance of such a gem from a butler's pocket, held the open box in his hand and stared earnestly at the ruby before passing it on as requested.

"It's certainly a peach!" he sighed. "What do you suppose it's worth, Aunt Mary?"

"About five thousand, I should think," answered Mrs. Bronson. The butler, standing near her, caught the sound of the little sigh that echoed Sidney's just before Jerry bustled into the room and to her side.

In his hand he carried the ruby that he had shown the evening before, and excitement left him almost breathless as he put the two stones together on the white table-cloth and leaned over them. Joan and

Sidney caught fire from his enthusiasm and left their seats for a closer view, while Peters, displaying discreet curiosity, hovered in the background. At last Bronson straightened up and gave his decision.

"As far as I can see," he announced solemnly, "these two rubies are exactly alike in every respect. A most amazing coincidence!" He turned to the butler. "Of course, I should like my opinion confirmed by an expert. I suppose there can be no objection to that?"

"None at all, sir."

"Then I will take it to town with me to-morrow." He suddenly bethought himself of the fiat he had delivered at breakfast. "I will ask you to come with me, Peters, so that you can take it back to Mr. McKittrick's apartment."

"Very good, sir."

Jerry lingeringly restored the jewel to its bed of wool and handed the white case to the butler, who dropped it into his coat as negligently as though it were a box of matches. The broker tucked his own into the corner of his vest pocket, but abruptly remembering his troublesome absent-mindedness he determined to guard against it at least on this oc-

casion. Instead of resuming his seat at the table, he marched at once into the library and carefully locked the ruby in the safe, and, when he returned to his dinner, it was with the pleasing knowledge that he had effectively provided against some tailor discovering a treasure when next his suit went to be pressed.

The evening passed quietly. Some neighbors dropped in and were entertained by Mrs. Bronson and Joan on the porch; Sidney slipped off to his own room, where he presently requested Peters to bring him some soda-water; Jerry excused himself from the party on the veranda on the plea of the papers he had brought home.

He labored in the library without interruption until ten o'clock, when the entrance of Peters with a tray of glasses and a pitcher of ice-water broke in on his work.

"By the way, Peters, it has just occurred to me —" he hesitated.

"Yes, sir?"

"I'm a little nervous about Mr. McKittrick's ruby. It's silly of me, perhaps, but if anything *should* happen to it I'd never forgive myself. You

have no very secure place to keep it and I've been wondering if it wouldn't be better to let me put it in the safe over-night?"

"I think it's an excellent idea, sir."

The butler immediately took the white box from his pocket and gave it to the broker, after which he silently left the room. Jerry lifted the cover and made sure that the ruby was all right, then put the box, still open, on the desk beside his pad. From time to time he raised his eyes from the papers with which he was engaged to glance fondly at the stone.

A little before eleven, Joan and Mrs. Bronson came into the house. He was vaguely aware of their footsteps ascending the stairs, and then he heard his wife's quiet movements as she paid her nightly visit to Cicely's room, which was directly above the library. A moment later he was surprised to hear her hurry from the nursery to the head of the stairs.

Some premonition of evil brought him to his feet, and he was at the door of the library when his wife's frightened voice called his name.

"Jerry! Do come here at once! There is something the matter with Cicely!"

Chapter Seven

IN THE NIGHT

JERRY BRONSON took the stairs three at a time with an agility that could only have been born of fear. Like most men to whom a child has been given late in life, he worshiped Cicely with a passion that knew no limitations; rubies and real estate could go hang together if his daughter needed his attention.

He and his wife, side by side, bent over the small bed. There was nothing of the hard look left that occasionally marred Mrs. Bronson's pretty face, nothing of the calculating flicker that sometimes shone in her eyes; the schemer, if such she were, was entirely lost in the mother, and it was only a terrified woman who leaned over the flushed face and tossing body of her child.

"Fever!" said Jerry, in a hushed voice from which he tried in vain to keep a note of anxiety. "We must telephone the doctor—"

He broke off with the abrupt realization that he was speaking to the empty air. She had anticipated his decision before he had put it into words, and had been too impatient to delegate her business to another. He heard her slippered feet flying down the stairs and into the library. . . .

Bad news travels with lightning speed through any community and a private household being only a very small community it is hardly surprising that Cicely's illness was known, not only to the family, but to the servants as well, before Mrs. Bronson had given a quick number to the central operator. Peters, shutting the dining-room windows for the night, had heard her first frightened summons to Jerry from the head of the stairs, followed a moment later by her rapid descent to the telephone. He carried the news to Julia, in the pantry, and then hastened to the front hall to see if he could be of any service in this sudden emergency.

He arrived there just in time to hear an impatient exclamation from the library; the receiver of the telephone was replaced on its hook with a bang. There was a second of silence — a second that was subsequently to give him much food for thought —

and then Mrs. Bronson appeared in the lighted doorway. She paused as she saw the figure of the butler vaguely visible in the gloom of the darkened hall, and she leaned against the jamb of the door as though her terror for the child had weakened her limbs. One hand went nervously to her throat, the other hung by her side, partially concealed by a fold of her dress, and Peters noted sympathetically that its fingers were clenched like those of a person in mortal pain.

"The doctor's not at home!" she said hoarsely. "He's at the club, playing cards — and Central says that 'phone is out of order!"

"Is there anything I can do, ma'am?" The butler stepped forward. "Can I take a message — ?"

"Oh — is that you, Peters?" She appeared to recover herself by a tremendous effort. "Thank you, but I expect someone will have to go for him in the car." She passed him quickly and ascended the stairs.

She found Jerry as she had left him, bending over the child's bed with furrows of anxiety wrinkling his kindly face. Beside him was Joan, in a wrapper, nearly as worried as he; at the foot of the bed was

Sidney, an expression of genuine concern on his flushed countenance. They all turned to her as she stammered her news.

"I will go at once —" began Bronson.

"Nonsense, Cousin Jerry, you don't want to leave Cicely, and I —"

"Hold on, Joan! I'm still dressed, and you aren't!"

It was Sidney's offer that carried the day, and he made his preparations so swiftly and drove the blue car so quickly that scarcely half an hour had elapsed before the watchful Peters opened the door on his return. He was accompanied by the doctor, a brisk, gray little man who trotted past the butler and up the stairs like one long familiar with the house. When he trotted down again twenty minutes later his face was grave, but not alarmingly so. Sidney had volunteered to drive him home, and the butler, who had grown very fond of the little girl, seized his opportunity to ask him a question while the young man was lighting the side lamps.

"I hope it's nothing serious, sir?"

"I don't think so," answered the doctor. "I expect she'll be up and around in no time."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, sir."

The two men took their seats, Sidney threw in his clutch, and the big car rolled away into the darkness. A faint shout came back to the butler's ear. "Don't wait up for me, Peters; I have my key."

The butler re-entered the house, closed the front door, and resumed his task of shutting everything for the night. He was by nature a careful man, and when he had finished he could have sworn that each window was securely fastened and every key turned in its lock.

"Peters!" It was Bronson calling from the head of the stairs.

"Yes, sir?"

"You can put out the light in the library. I shan't be coming down again."

"Very good, sir." The butler switched off the light in question and retreated to the rear of the house.

It had been Mrs. Bronson's intention to sit up with the child, but it happened that she had had a very tiring day and, encouraged by the doctor's cheerful manner and by the fact that little Cicely

was now sleeping quietly, she yielded to Joan's insistence that she should get some rest.

"Do go to bed, Cousin Mary. I'm not sleepy and I'll sit up with Cicely for some hours anyway; if there's the slightest change in her I promise to call either you or Cousin Jerry at once. You look so pale and worn — do try to get some rest, and stop worrying about everything."

"Oh, Joan! Worrying has become so habitual with me now that I hardly notice it any more!" She smiled drearily. "All right, I'll do as you say."

The girl settled to her self-appointed task in the sick-room, armed with a new novel and an agreeable consciousness of virtue. She first took some dark-colored paper and made a neat shade for the electric lamp, arranging the shield so that the light was cut off from the room and fell only on the pages of her book. She sat there reading, it seemed to her for hours. . . .

Something awakened her with a start, and as she immediately realized that she had been asleep the pleasant consciousness of virtue was replaced by an angry sense of shame. A quick glance at Cicely, however, showed her that no harm had come of the

brief nap, and then she fell to wondering what had aroused her. She had a hazy impression that there had been a muffled thud from some part of the house, and stealing to the door of the room she listened with straining ears for a repetition of the noise.

She was much more curious than nervous, for she had absolutely no reason to believe that the sound had not been of some perfectly legitimate origin. She only thought it a little odd that anyone should be stirring at such an hour in that normally well-ordered household. Of course its one black sheep — but no! A glance at her wrist-watch showed one o'clock, and Sidney must have been back and in bed fully an hour before. Yet if that were so, why hadn't she heard him? Had she been asleep longer than she thought? She was still debating the point without much interest when her heart suddenly leaped at the sound of tip-toeing steps from the lower part of the house. She held her breath. . . .

Joan was naturally a courageous young woman, and after a moment of wonderment her courage was backed up by her common-sense. She told her-

self that no self-respecting burglar would walk about the carpeted floors of a well-built house and make noise enough to be heard on the story above. Fortified by this reflection, and not wanting to awaken any of the family unnecessarily, she appointed herself a committee of one to investigate those footsteps and determine the identity of this nocturnal prowler.

She prepared for her expedition by kicking off her high-heeled slippers; that done, her silk-stockinged feet were as noiseless as a cat's as she crept to the head of the stairs and down a sufficient number of steps to a point where she could lean over the banisters and get a view of the whole lower hall.

In spite of her courage and coolness, however, her heart gave a very panicky little bump as she saw the figure of a man come out of the library — a man who threaded his way through the casual obstructions of the hall by the aid of a slender beam of light from an electric torch, that modern improvement on the traditional dark-lantern of a burglar! The little beam flashed weirdly here and there like a will-o'-the-wisp. Yet it was the radiation of this light from the white walls of the hall

that enabled her to recognize the man below her, and her fears vanished in a breath of relief.

Her burglar was Peters, and the apparent object of his trip to the library was a book that he carried in his hand. Evidently he had come down by the servants' stairway in the rear, had gone to the library, and was now returning to his room by the same route. Joan smiled to herself in the darkness.

It had struck her once or twice that the man was, to use the old phrase, "a bit above his station," and it amused her now to see this confirmation of her surmise. Did he pass his nights in study while the rest of the world slumbered? or was he merely troubled by insomnia and driven to light literature for relief? She had never heard of a butler who had insomnia — usually, she thought, they slept like logs — but she supposed it was possible. She would have liked very much to know the name of the book thus surreptitiously borrowed and for a second she contemplated slipping down to the library and trying to identify it by its absence, but the thought of her cousin's well-stocked shelves gave her pause. How could she ever guess the book he took? She abandoned the idea, and softly retraced her

steps to Cicely's room, the little smile still playing about the corners of her mouth.

She resumed her interrupted vigil, and no further alarms disturbed the night. A faint tinge of gray was showing at the edges of the shuttered windows when she took her last survey of the child, who was now sleeping peacefully. Joan regarded her for a little while with pursed lips, then rather hesitantly decided to go to bed herself and take the responsibility of not awakening either of her cousins.

Jerry Bronson was up very early in the morning, probably before anyone else in the house, but, when he had satisfied himself by a trip into Cicely's room that the little girl was sleeping naturally, and with lessened fever, he went back to his dressing-room and leisurely set himself to the daily routine of shave and bath. It was nearly half past seven before he came downstairs. He found the butler just completing the sweeping of the front hall, which he liked to get out of the way before breakfast.

"Good-morning, Peters."

"Good-morning, sir. I hope the little girl is better, sir?"

"Very much, thank you. I expect when the

doctor comes again he will tell us there's no more cause for alarm."

"That is good news." The butler deftly gathered up his brooms and dusters. "Shall I arrange your breakfast, sir?"

"If you please," answered Bronson, and entered the library.

It was possibly two minutes later that Peters, surprised by the bursting open of his pantry door, looked up to see the agitated figure of his employer, whose disordered hair and disheveled appearance were in startling contrast to his customary neatness. And when he spoke, his strained voice came out in breathless gasps.

"P-p-peters, have you taken that ruby?"

"Good gracious, sir, of course not!"

"Well, it's g-g-gone!" said Jerry with a gulp of anguish.

The two men stared at each other in stricken silence.

Chapter Eight

THE SWITCH-KEY

IT WAS the butler who recovered first, and, taking note of his master's shaken condition, he hurriedly drew up a chair, into which the trembling broker sank gratefully. Peters himself remained standing, his eyes grave and troubled.

"When you speak of the ruby, sir — you mean Mr. McKittrick's?"

"Yes."

"But, surely — how did they get into the safe, sir?"

Jerry groaned, and vigorously massaged his hair. "Peters, I've never been so ashamed of myself in my life, but I've got to tell you the truth. I left the ruby lying on my desk all night."

"My word, sir!"

"I put it there when you handed it to me," explained the unhappy Bronson, "intending of course to lock it in my safe before I went to bed. Then

Mrs. Bronson called me upstairs on account of Cicely, — and I haven't been near the library since, except just now." He added miserably, "You see — when I heard she was ill — I forgot everything else — "

"The most natural thing in the world, sir!" agreed the butler.

"Thank you, Peters — but it was inexcusable, just the same. And what to do now, I simply can't imagine. I don't seem able to think."

"You've had a nasty shock, sir, I can see that. But I don't think we ought to give up hope just yet. Couldn't we have a look at the library, sir? After all, the ruby may be only mislaid."

Jerry was only too willing, and though he felt in his heart that the jewel was really gone he still managed to draw some encouragement and strength from the butler's suggestion. But it was Peters who led the way from the pantry and who checked their progress in the doorway of the library while he surveyed the room with a searching glance.

"Can you notice anything changed about this room, sir, since you left it last night?"

The question was not lacking in shrewdness, and

Jerry tried to concentrate all his scattered faculties on a close examination of the library before he answered.

Slight changes there were, of course. The chair in front of his desk had been pushed to one side, and the telephone had been drawn from its customary place at the rear of the desk and now stood almost at the forward edge.

"That would be due to Mrs. Bronson," said the broker. "You know she came in here to telephone the doctor."

"Yes, sir. I was in the hall when she came out, sir." The butler answered mechanically, his thoughts elsewhere. He was thinking of the gossipy Mr. Jackson whom he had met on the train, of Mrs. Bronson's debt to the Lathams — the most awkward kind of a debt to a woman with social aspirations and a husband who disapproved of gambling! — and of her marked agitation when she had leaned against the doorway of the library the evening before. . . . Peters came back to the present with an effort, aware that the broker was eyeing him almost with impatience. "You don't notice anything else, sir?"

"No." Bronson swept the room with another glance. "Yes, by George, I do!" He pointed with outstretched arm. "The right-hand drawer of my desk; see, it is slightly open! I'm sure it was closed when I left."

"Was there anything valuable in it?"

"Not a thing." The broker knit his brows. "I can't remember having touched it myself for weeks."

"That doesn't seem important — though of course you never know in a case like this." Peters scratched his chin reflectively. "That's all, sir?"

"One other detail," corrected the broker with grim humor. "The box that contained the ruby is still on my desk where I left it — but now it is empty!"

At a slight gesture from the butler, the two men moved into the room and stood staring at the little white box as though waiting for it to reveal the identity of the person whose predatory fingers had dipped into it during the night. The box lay there, closed and apparently containing its precious jewel.

"That sort of knocks out my idea that it's just mislaid," mused Peters. "If it was that, or if it had just dropped behind something, the box would prob-

ably have gone too. Did you take it out yourself, perhaps, sir?"

"No. I merely opened the lid and placed the box where you see it."

They set themselves rather hopelessly to search the room, but, in spite of this feeling of pessimism, their hunt was made systematically and thoroughly. They explored every inch of the floor, lifted the rugs and shook them, moved the heavy leather furniture and thrust inquisitive fingers down the edges of its upholstery. Their labor was fruitless, and when they made an end of it, they were satisfied that the ruby was not in the library.

"How about the safe, sir?"

"That doesn't appear to have been touched."

"Wouldn't it be just as well to look inside, sir, and make sure?"

Jerry Bronson forthwith sank to his knees and busied himself with the combination. In his chastened mood, he was eager to fall in with any suggestion from anybody. His trembling fingers turned the little knob to and fro, missing the combination the first two times but catching it successfully at the third attempt. Jerry pulled open the door and

peered eagerly within, then turned over the contents of various trays and compartments while the butler waited patiently for his report. At last the broker re-locked the safe and stood erect.

"Nothing has been touched," he declared.

"That's queer too, don't you think, sir?" Peters contemplated the strong-box. "It's a nice little safe, sir, but I shouldn't think it would fool a burglar more than five minutes, if he knew his trade. You'd have thought a regular cracksman would have had a shot at it rather than go off with just a loose ruby he was lucky enough to find waiting for him."

Had the butler slightly emphasized the words "regular cracksman" or had Jerry only imagined it? At all events, that moment witnessed the birth of a fearful suspicion in the broker's mind. He did not have the courage to look directly at his companion, but stole a sideways look to see if the man's face revealed any trace of the same sickening thought. He caught, however, no responsive look from that quarter. The butler's features had never seemed more impassive than at that instant, and Jerry ventured a trembling question.

"The — the doors and windows, Peters; were — were they — ?"

"I've been waiting for you to ask that, sir, and I've got my answer ready." The butler's voice was very grave. "I can take my oath, sir, that every door and window was locked carefully when I came down this morning, just as I left them when I went up last night. You know, the first thing I do every day is to throw open the whole downstairs part of the house to let in the air, and it is quite impossible that the fastenings should have been tampered with without my noticing it."

Jerry winced at the answer so firmly delivered and so evidently the expression of the man's profound conviction, but he caught at a vagrant hope suggested by Peters' account of his morning routine.

"Isn't it possible that a sneak-thief might have slipped into the house while you were opening up? I mean, if you were in the rear, couldn't he get in at the front without your hearing him?"

"But it didn't happen that way, sir." The butler's tone was respectful but very decided. "I came down by the back stairs and opened that part of the house first, and after I came here to the front it

would have been quite impossible for anybody to get in or out of this library without my seeing him. You know yourself, sir, that the arrangement of these rooms makes that certain."

"But, Peters, that — that means . . ." Jerry could not finish.

"If you'll excuse me, sir, I don't think it is for you or me to decide what it means."

"Oh!" The broker gave a little groan as he recognized the implication contained in those words. He sat down in the chair before his desk and patted his brow with a handkerchief. "You are thinking of the police! Yes, we must notify them at once, I suppose."

"It's the usual thing to do, sir."

"It is terrible to think of them in this house — and just when poor little Cicely needs all our attention. . . . It will be an awful shock to Mrs. Bronson." He sighed and drew the telephone toward him, but paused with his hand on the receiver. "By the way, Peters, I want you to understand that I accept the full responsibility for this wretched business; it is a responsibility that I recognize, and that I will not shirk; if we do not recover

the ruby I shall certainly indemnify Mr. McKittrick for the full value of his loss."

"Ah!" The butler, a little startled by the unexpectedness of the pledge, hurriedly recalled his thoughts from the grim reflection that the presence of the police in the house might indeed prove a shock to Mrs. Bronson. "That is remarkably good of you, sir, — especially when one remembers that it was all my fault in the first place for bringing the stone here."

"Oh — I encouraged you! No, Peters, I've paid for my mistakes before this, and I expect I shall have to pay now for my carelessness."

The butler did some rapid thinking. It was very important to recover the ruby, but it was very unpleasant to think of recovering it through the arrest of Mrs. Bronson — and that was the least that could be expected if the heavy-handed police took charge of the case and discovered the powerful motive supplied by her bridge debts. And, worse than that, what would be the effect on kindly old Bronson if such a suspicion were even breathed against his wife? Peters had found his liking for Jerry growing stronger and stronger as the quiet days passed,

and he had never liked him better than at this instant when the broker temporarily thrust aside his own worries in order to reassure a servant. The old boy was certainly a good sport —

"One moment, sir!" The butler, seized with an idea, threw out his hand in time to stop Jerry from lifting the telephone receiver. "You are about to call up the police, sir?"

"Naturally."

"Before you do, sir, I think I ought to tell you that Mr. McKittrick has almost a horror of the regular police. He has several funny notions, sir, and I've just remembered that that's one of them. He hates publicity, and I've heard him say that he'd just as soon tell a secret to a newspaper as to a policeman."

"But, Peters — !" Jerry Bronson looked his amazement. "What do you want me to do? You can hardly expect me to reimburse McKittrick without making some effort to find the ruby — and then, there is the matter of right and wrong!" The broker's jaw was set at a sterner angle than Peters had ever seen it before. "The thief should be punished — no matter who he is!"

"I feel sure Mr. McKittrick would not insist upon that if he can only recover his ruby," answered the butler steadily. "What I was going to advise, sir, was a private detective — if you can put your hands on a good one."

"A private detective!" Jerry Bronson started visibly and shot a keen glance at the butler — confound 'em, why didn't they ever drop those impenetrable masks! "And suppose I did engage one — ?"

"Well, sir, he would get all the facts just as easily as the regular police, but he would be employed by you and bound absolutely by your instructions. It would be his affair to find the ruby and identify the thief — and then it would be time enough to consider the matter of punishment."

The speech was like a knife in Bronson's heart. Had the butler put it in so many words, he could not have said more plainly: 'This thief is of your own household; don't talk of punishment unless you wish to punish yourself also, through sorrow and disgrace!' The imputation was so distressing that Jerry could scarcely bear it. His breath began to come with difficulty. He rose unsteadily.

"Let us go out on the piazza, Peters. It's — it's close here. . . ."

The butler looked at him in quick concern.

"Excuse me, sir, but I think a bite of breakfast would do you more good than anything else. Let me bring you a cup of coffee, at least, in the dining-room."

"Thank you, Peters. Perhaps you are right."

The coffee did have a revivifying effect, and the broker began to take more careful stock of the situation although he did not yet put it into words, even to himself, the fear that was beginning to possess him. He looked up from his second cup.

"Where on earth is Mr. Sidney, Peters? Not down yet?"

"I've not seen him, sir. But it's only a few minutes past eight and he often doesn't come down until quite half past."

A few minutes past eight! Portentous events make minutes seem like hours, and an hour like a half day. Bronson could have sworn it was almost noon.

An approaching footstep made them both glance at the door, and with Sidney in their minds they

confidently expected him to appear in the doorway. But it was Joan who entered, fresh and radiant in spite of her nocturnal vigils.

"Good-morning, Cousin Jerry! Good-morning, Peters! Get me some breakfast, do! I'm nearly famished." She dropped a dutiful kiss on the tip of Jerry's nose, seated herself in her place, and was busy for a moment with her napkin. "I stopped in for a peek at Cicely. Do you know, that child is still sound asleep — looking like a rosebud in a snow-bank. I'm sure she's quite fit again. Why!" She had taken her first good look at her cousin. "What's the matter, Cousin Jerry?"

"Matter enough, Joan. McKittrick's ruby is missing—and I'm very much afraid it's been stolen."

"My aunt!" thought Joan. Then her mind flashed back to the few words she had exchanged with Sidney in the library two days before, and her cheek paled at the unpleasant memory. "How did the thieves get into the safe?"

Jerry nerved himself to relate everything he knew about the disappearance of the jewel, and he was still in the middle of his story when Peters came from the pantry bearing the girl's breakfast. Jerry

paused in his narrative, and Joan shot a question at him during the opportune lull.

"How did they get into the house?"

"It doesn't look as if they did," answered her cousin heavily. "I may as well tell you at once, Joan, that it appears to have been what the police call an 'inside job.' Peters found all the windows and doors carefully locked this morning." Jerry rubbed his disordered hair. "But it's almost inconceivable to me that any member of this household could have admitted the thief, much less stooped to theft himself."

"Rot!" said Joan tersely and vigorously, and in some fashion, the word was the most comforting that either Jerry or Peters had heard that day. "That's absurd! A regular burglar did it of course, and Peters is simply mistaken about the fastenings being in order."

"I'm afraid not, Miss."

Joan, like Peters a little earlier, did some rapid thinking and also arrived at some swift decisions. Despite her prompt rejection of the "inside job" theory, she knew in her heart that there was reason to believe that it might have been that — and that

she herself quite possibly had a better reason than anyone else to believe so. She abruptly decided that she could never reveal Sidney's unfortunate remark about a can-opener and his uncle's safe. Then she recollected her adventure of the night when she had seen Peters leaving the library about one o'clock and she decided to save that bit of evidence for Jerry's private ear. Her third decision was to say nothing at all about anything, which appealed to her as being the surest way to avoid making any slip that would incriminate Sidney. Yes, that was the best course to take, at least until she had made up her mind whether or not Sidney could have stooped so low.

Joan's appetite was not proof against such irritating cogitations, and the breakfast for which she had pined turned out after all to be distasteful. She forced herself to swallow a few mouthfuls, then impulsively pushed back her chair and rose from the table.

"Cousin Jerry, are you going to use the car this morning? No? Then I'll take it now and run down to the druggist; there's a prescription that Dr. Strong left to be made up in the morning."

She left the room, followed by Bronson. There were still many things to be discussed by the two men most concerned in the loss of the ruby, so he beckoned to Peters to accompany him, and they turned into the hall together in time to catch an exclamation of surprise from Joan, who had gone into the library.

"Hello! I say, Cousin Jerry, have you got the switch-key? I put it in here yesterday afternoon, and now it's gone."

They found her beside the desk, gazing into its right-hand drawer, which she had pulled out as far as it would go. She waited for him to answer, but when his response came it was not in the least what she had expected.

"You'll have to ask Sidney, my dear. Have you forgotten that he took the car last night for Dr. Strong?"

Bronson's voice was curiously quiet considering his sensations. Here, he thought, was the very thing he had dreaded most; proof positive that Sidney had entered the library during the course of the preceding evening!

Joan read his face and inwardly fumed at the bad

luck that had led her unwittingly to score a point against her scapegrace cousin in spite of all her good intentions. Well — it was done now beyond helping! She shrugged her shoulders and managed to reply lightly enough.

"That's very tiresome of him! Is he still in his room? I'll go up and get it from him."

She moved towards the door, but had hardly taken three steps when her attention was caught by the sound of an automobile coming up the road, its engine pulsing with a beat that seemed very familiar. When it turned in the gate, and she heard the unmistakable whirr of the horn that she blew so often herself, doubt was no longer possible.

"Why, there's the car now!" she cried.

The three of them, moved by a common impulse of surprise, trooped out to the veranda. There, sure enough, was the dark-blue car, at its wheel a somewhat grimy young man whom they recognized as the one handy-man of the garage near the station.

"Where did you get the car?" demanded Bronson.

"From Mr. Durant, sir. He drove in and left it just before we closed last night. Said we were to

bring it around for you this morning and tell you that he'd gone to town on the midnight local."

There was a moment during which they all stared at him in stupefied silence. It was Joan who came to the scratch.

"I'm sure we're very much obliged to you for your trouble," she said sweetly, and smiled upon the grimy young man as though he had been the bearer of the best news she had ever heard — instead of the worst.

Chapter Nine

SIDNEY LEAVES TOWN

THE young man from the garage took his departure, all innocent of the turmoil he had excited in the breasts of the three people he left behind him on the veranda. They stared gloomily at the blue car for a long minute; then Joan pulled herself together.

"I'm off!" she declared. She got into the car, settled herself at the wheel, drew on a pair of stout driving-gloves that she took from a pocket in the door, and turned hopefully to the two men who watched her silently. "Do come along, Cousin Jerry, and blow some of those nasty notions out of your head."

He shook the member in question disconsolately. "Thanks, Joan, but I must go upstairs and break this news to your Cousin Mary."

The car slid off, snorting back at him as if it

shared the opinion of its fair driver, and Bronson turned to the butler.

"Peters," he said slowly, "I've been thinking over your idea of getting a private detective, and I believe that it is the best thing to do under — under the circumstances. But only provided that McKittrick agrees — I insist on his approval. After all we have only your belief that he wishes to dispose of his ruby; he may prefer on the other hand to recover it, and in that case it should rest with him to decide what steps are to be taken."

"Yes, sir."

"I feel that he should be telegraphed at once and put in possession of the facts, and I'll leave it to you to do so, since a telegram of such importance had better reach him from you than from an utter stranger. Tell him anything else that suggests itself to you, but be sure and ask his authority to substitute a private detective for the police."

"In the meantime, sir, don't you think it would be as well to engage someone and let him get to work? Something must be done no matter what Mr. McKittrick likes. Even if Mr. McKittrick doesn't approve, your man can still turn over the

results of his investigation to the police, and then we won't have lost any time."

"A good idea, Peters. I'll attend to it as soon as I get to my office.

"And I'll send off that telegram at once, sir, if you think I'd better. We may get an answer from Mr. McKittrick this evening if our telegram catches him early and he wires immediately."

"Do so by all means. The telegraph office is at the station, you know."

"Yes, sir."

The butler set off upon his errand without delay, first getting his hat from his room. He passed through the kitchen on his way out of the house, and he was not surprised to find Mrs. O'Malley and Julia deeply mystified by his long conference with the head of the house.

"An' what have you been up to the whole live-long mornin'?" demanded the cook. "Lavin' us us here to ate our heads off wid curiosity, let alone havin' to fix the madam's breakfast tray for her!"

"Is there anything wrong with the child?" asked Julia, her sullen features momentarily softened by a look of concern for the suffering little Cicely, to

whom she was devoted. There was, after all, a tender spot in the girl's nature.

Peters could see no point in keeping them in ignorance of what had occurred; they must know sooner or later, and they might better get the truth from him than to pick up a lot of misinformation by eavesdropping.

"Something rather queer happened last night," he said. "When Mr. Bronson went to bed he left a valuable ruby on his desk, and this morning it's missing. I'm afraid there's no doubt that it was stolen."

"The saints preserve us!" Mrs. O'Malley's capacious mouth hung open in surprise. "Who iver heard th' like o' —"

"Hello — watch out!"

Peters sprang forward as he spoke, not in time to catch Julia Shaughnessy's falling body, but in time to break the worst shock of its impact upon the tiled floor of the kitchen. The girl had gone down as if pole-axed. Not a premonitory cry or sign had she made. She simply collapsed. The butler, stooping over her, was lost in amazement.

"Whatever made her do that?" he muttered.

"It seems I'm a poor hand at breaking bad news, but why the deuce — ?"

"Gwan out o' here!" came a terse command in his ear. "If she comes 'round an' sees your face it may send her off again!"

Mrs. O'Malley's big, gentle hands were already busy about the girl's neck, and Peters discreetly withdrew from the scene — taking with him the face that had provoked the cook's unkind remark. He started off on his errand to the railroad station, walked rather slowly as he puzzled over the incident he had just witnessed.

It seemed to him that it was an extraordinary way for Julia to behave, for she was normally a stolid, self-contained girl with no suggestion of the hysterical in her outward carriage. It could not have been the mere fact of a theft in the house that had caused her to swoon — there must have been some weightier reason than that, he felt sure. Yet it didn't altogether look as if she could be concerned in the disappearance of the ruby, or she would scarcely have fainted at an announcement that she would then be expecting. Had she been bluffing? Peters answered his own question with a firm nega-

tive; no actress living, he was positive, could have gone down the way Julia had unless she was absolutely unconscious. He was still frowning over the problem as he reached the station, when his attention was entirely given to the business of writing a telegram whose composition was not devoid of certain embarrassing features.

Jerry Bronson had gone direct from the piazza in search of his wife, whom he found at Cicely's bedside. He drew her out of earshot of the child and as gently as possible told her about the vanished ruby. She was obviously much upset, and at sight of her pale, frightened face he forebore to mention his fear that the theft had been an inside job, much less that his suspicions were being slowly but steadily directed to one of the members of their own little circle. He was relieved at her swiftly-expressed assumption that some clever burglar had forced an entrance to the house.

"No doubt, my dear, no doubt."

"You — you have notified the police, I suppose?" she whispered, her white face partly turned away from him.

"No. Peters suggested that a private detective would be better, and as he must be even more anxious to recover the ruby than I am, I thought it only right to consider his wishes — especially as he tells me that McKittrick would prefer a private investigation.

"Oh! I *am* glad of that! A detective will be bad enough, but to have had the police in the house — !"

"Yes, I knew you wouldn't have liked that."

"I'd have hated it!" declared his wife with convincing vigor.

She repeated this view to Joan on a later occasion, and added with engaging candor, "You see, I knew I could manage a private detective if he wasn't *too* impossible, but the police would be disastrous! They've such an uncanny way of finding things out and one never knows what they may tell — or whom!"

Jerry Bronson, speeding to New York to make his belated appearance at the office, was happily ignorant of his wife's somewhat cryptic cogitations or he would have had an even more depressed air than when he finally seated himself at his desk. He

immediately sent for Bartlett, upon whose shrewdness and steady optimism he knew he could count, and laid his troubles before him, omitting no detail either of fact or fancy from his recital; as he expected, the loyal Pear instantly took up the cudgels on behalf of the absent Sidney, whom he liked.

"I think you're doing the boy a grave injustice, Jerry," he remonstrated earnestly. "Suppose he is a bit wild? That doesn't mean he's a *thief!* Suppose things do look black against him? You wouldn't hang a dog on circumstantial evidence any more than I would! You're fond of the boy I know, and if you aren't careful you'll hurt yourself as much as you'll hurt him."

"I know. . . ." Jerry's eyes showed his misery. "What do you suggest my doing, Henry?"

"A heart-to-heart talk with Sidney at the earliest possible moment is what you owe to both yourself and him; you must tell him frankly that suspicion points more to him than to anyone else, and give him a chance to explain and defend himself. I expect you can tell by his manner the present state of his conscience, and if I'm not mistaken you will bring the interview to a close with an apology."

"I sincerely trust so, Henry."

"There is one other thing you should make sure of before seeing Sidney," pursued the Bartlett Pear meditatively. "Forgive my referring to one of your little failings, Jerry, but you realize yourself how absent-minded you are; have you thought of that in connection with this affair? Are you sure, when Mrs. Bronson called you, that you didn't stick the ruby in your pocket?"

"Henry, I've worn my pockets out looking through them."

"Perhaps you instinctively thrust the ruby into some hiding-place in the library before you left? Every room has little nooks that will baffle inexpert searchers, so you needn't tell me that you and the butler wore out the library!" He thought a moment. "For instance, when you get home to-night you'd better probe your ink-well; I once read a very clever yarn where some bright lad concealed a pearl that way."

"I don't blame you for taking my habitual carelessness into account, Henry, but I really can't see that it explains this trouble. I assure you that I raced from my desk too quickly when I heard Mary

call to have had time to hide the ruby, even if I'd thought of it." He shook his head sadly. "I wish I had — oh, I wish I had!"

"Well, I hope it will turn up, Jerry — and I think that butler of yours ought to be strung up for taking such chances with another man's property."

"I daresay, Henry. But in common justice they'd have to prepare a companion noose on the same gibbet for me!"

"Hmm. True!" The Bartlett Pear came to his substantial feet with his elephantine grace. "Meanwhile, I've got to be off on that Van Nostrand business." He cast a commiserating glance at his partner, who checked him with a question before he disappeared.

"Henry, do you know the name of any private inquiry agents?"

"Traynor, Foster, and Henderson," responded the Pear glibly.

"That sounds familiar," muttered Bronson. "Where have I heard those names before?"

"In your own mail, you blessed old idiot! Don't you remember showing me their ad. a few days ago?"

"So I did — so I did!" admitted Bronson, ready as ever to poke fun at his weakness. "Really, I must go in for Swedish massage, or bust development, or whatever they call that new-fangled system of memory training."

"You'll be handsomely busted all right if you don't hang on to your valuables a little better," was the Pear's somewhat cruel rejoinder as he left the room.

Jerry Bronson, with all his faults, had one virtue that made him almost unique among men; when he asked for advice, he usually followed whatever was given him. Accordingly, the Bartlett Pear had no sooner left the building than Jerry hurried forth also, his destination being the big insurance company where Sidney was employed.

A fresh burden was added to his already sufficient load of suspicion when an office boy of the Universal told him that Mr. Durant was absent for the day; and Jerry was obliged to do some quick thinking while the boy waited for a possible message. He did not wish to excite comment by too pointly asking questions as to his nephew's probable whereabouts, but it fortunately occurred to him that there was

a matter of insurance upon which he wished to consult the General Agent of the company — who happily was Sidney's immediate superior in the office. He therefore sent in his name to Mr. Maitland, and because the firm of Bronson and Bartlett brought in a handsome volume of insurance every year, the august potentate himself emerged from his den and escorted him back therein.

Jerry presented his problem and recorded its solution; he chatted lightly about various topics of the day; he cordially confirmed the General Agent's blistering opinion of the Legislature at Albany; it was not until he had risen to depart that he broached the subject nearest to his heart, and thus achieved a fair appearance of casualness.

"By the way, Maitland, how is that nephew of mine getting along?"

"Very well indeed," answered the General Agent promptly. "In fact, it was on my mind to tell you something that I think you will be glad to hear. A rather peculiar situation has arisen in one of our up-state agencies — Mainesville — and as our regular field agent is unable to get there just now we have decided to let Durant go up and try his hand

at straightening things out. It is an affair of considerable importance, and if he makes good — as I am almost certain he will — it will mean his early promotion to a field of his own. So you see you have every reason to feel proud of him! "

" That is splendid news! " cried Jerry, and indeed he was glad to hear something good of the precious Prodigal. " By the way, I — er — rather expected to find him here now; can you tell me where I am likely to catch him? "

" Why, no, I' m afraid I can't. He's starting upstate for us this evening, and he naturally asked for to-day free to make his preparations. I imagine you'll find him at home, packing suit-cases."

" Of course," said Bronson. " That is surely where he is."

He took his leave outwardly cheerful, but, in his heart, he knew that home was the very last place he would find Sidney; the lively young wretch kept plenty of clothes at an up-town club, and it was extremely probable that he would take his departure straight from New York rather than from Claredale, where the shadow of Maybelle darkened the usually sunny skies. And he would especially avoid

home if he had been concerned in the disappearance of McKittrick's ruby!

Jerry had looked up the address of the detective agency — which was next on his calling list — and went directly to that office after leaving the Universal. He found the place without difficulty, and he was rather pleasantly impressed to find himself in a suite of offices whose quiet but excellent appointments bespoke no mean prosperity. There was only one occupant in the outer office — a rather old young woman, neatly dressed, who came forward with questioning eyebrows.

"I'd like to see one of the firm on — on private business."

"Your name, please?"

"Jeremiah Bronson."

The expression of cold indifference with which she had met him seemed to fade a little from her manner. She smiled faintly.

"Oh, yes. I think we've been circularizing you, haven't we?"

"Quite true. But you must have a remarkable memory to recall one name out of so many!"

"You have to have a remarkable memory in this

business," she explained. "Only Mr. Traynor is in at this minute, and he is engaged, but I will take your card in, and I'm sure he'll be free in a short time."

She went off through a door marked "Private," and Jerry Bronson sat down to await her return. She came back almost instantly and confirmed her prophecy that Mr. Traynor would soon be at leisure, and then returned to some work that was engaging her attention at a neighboring table.

While he waited, Jerry idly studied the girl's face as she bent to her task; it seemed to him a little hard, as though her life had not been free from bitterness and disillusionment. But then, of course, it might well be that this business, besides training one's memory, would have a tendency to harden a woman. Certainly he would not wish Cicely to grow up to be the secretary of a private detective. . . .

A door opened, and Jerry came out of his revery at the sound of a pleasant voice addressing him:

"Mr. Bronson? I'm sorry to have kept you waiting. . . ."

Chapter Ten

THE DETECTIVE

JERRY BRONSON, quite unconsciously, had visualized the head of a private inquiry office as a heavy-jowled, beefy veteran retired from the regular force, and he received his second pleasant surprise when he looked up at the man who had spoken his name. Traynor was tall and lean, strongly-built without being clumsy, with a clear-eyed, smooth-shaven, not unprepossessing face; he was well dressed in a dark blue suit, was rather surprisingly young for the head of a big detective agency, but discounted his youthful appearance by an alert manner that suggested keenness and ability; his eyes were set well apart, were dark gray, and frequently twinkled with a kindly good-humor. As he turned to lead the way into his sanctum, Jerry noticed that his head was of the shape that phrenologists associated with brains.

In less than half a minute the broker found him-

self seated in a most restful chair and taking the first contented puff of a wonderful cigar that Traynor had produced from a fine old mahogany box. The whole atmosphere of this private office spoke of comfort that nearly approached luxury — the sort of an office, thought Jerry, where a man whose every sense was indulged and pampered might reveal his closest secrets and scarcely realize that he was speaking. It was a study, or den, rather than a business office, and the only harsh note in it that recalled the sterner outside world of affairs was a massive safe that stood in a corner of the room, the firm's name inscribed across its doors in large gilt lettering.

"Now, Mr. Bronson," said Traynor encouragingly.

Jerry waited for no second bidding, but entered upon his story almost automatically. He had discussed the whole affair with Peters, had related the tale once to Joan, once — slightly edited — to his wife, and once to the Bartlett Pear, so that it was no wonder that he now found himself almost letter perfect. He ended his narrative in an amazingly short time.

"Very good," said Traynor approvingly, fingering the pages of a small memorandum book in which he had made an occasional note. I wish all our clients were as clear and concise. Of course there are some points that the layman overlooks, or we would soon be out of business!" He laughed pleasantly. "Keys, for example; how about your front door?"

"I have a latch-key, and my nephew has another."

"The ubiquitous Sidney! How his name does keep cropping up at every point! And the back door?"

"I hardly know. The cook has a key, I presume — but she has been with us for years and, I'm sure, is perfectly honest."

"My experience has shown that cooks usually are. Once in awhile you'll find a culinary crook, but they're rare. I suppose there is a mellowing influence about their work that keeps them contented — and of course they're well-fed! Under such circumstances there is but small incentive to crime — but, pardon me, this is a digression! Now, about the jeweler's box in which you left the ruby;

do you know if anyone has touched it since you found it empty this morning?"

"No one has. Peters — my butler, you remember — suggested our leaving it strictly alone in the hope that it might yield important finger-prints upon examination."

"Ah. A shrewd fellow, this Peters!"

"Of course," added Jerry, as became a student of modern detective literature, "the thief may have worn gloves. They often do, don't they?"

"Oh, yes. But in this case it is possible that whoever took the ruby may have seized an opportunity that was unexpectedly offered, and have yielded to temptation on the mad impulse of a moment. If that were so he would hardly have stopped to put on gloves, even if he were possessed of such unlikely articles, on a hot summer evening."

"A moment of impulse!" faltered Jerry. "Do you mean — do you think this theft was the unpremeditated action of — of someone — that is, do you believe it was an inside job?"

"My dear sir!" The young detective looked reproachful. "That would be a drastic view to adopt at this early stage of the investigation. I

cannot help having my own ideas, based on what you have told me — though the ideal detective preserves an open mind theoretically to the bitter end! — but you mustn't expect me to produce them thus soon in the game as my considered opinions."

"Of course not. And — you will take the case?"

"With pleasure, sir. And remember, Mr. Bronson, that the hardest nut cracks under sufficient pressure."

"You will send a man to Claredale?"

"I'd rather handle that end of it myself; but there are one or two other places that I will send operatives — and of course the pawn-shops must be notified." He shuffled the leaves of his note-book and poised his pencil above a blank sheet. "If you please, what is the name of the town for which your nephew is leaving to-night?"

"Mainesville, Oneida County," answered Jerry, his heart sinking.

"And the name of his club here?"

"The Albany."

The detective's quick eye noted the other's perturbation.

"You mustn't regard these questions too seri-

ously, Mr. Bronson. The evidence against Sidney is very circumstantial, very hypothetical, but one must cover every possible chance in a case of this kind. Frankly, I consider the young man well worth watching — and so should you, for if my operative reports nothing suspicious in his movements it should go far to relieve your mind of its present doubts."

"That is so," admitted Jerry.

"The object of our inquiry won't be directly approached, or if he is, it will be done so delicately that he will never dream of connecting the incident with his own affairs; I can always rely on my employees to use the utmost discretion."

"When will you come to Claredale, Mr. Traynor?"

"In an hour or two at the latest. Perhaps you will be good enough to 'phone Mrs. Bronson to expect me? Then if you have business to attend to in town you need not feel that your presence is required at home."

"Thank you, I will telephone," promised Jerry. "Then I'll go to the Downtown Club and try to order a lunch that will help me to forget this

confounded mess. It's a tremendous relief to me already to know that I have placed the matter in competent hands."

"The Downtown Club? A man for whom I once did a small service is in the habit of lunching there. General Prescott. I wonder if you happen to know him?"

"I do. We are not precisely friends, but we are what I might call old speaking acquaintances."

"Well, if you run across him to-day, give him my kindest remembrances." Traynor rose with a hint of finality, and Jerry struggled out of his comfortable chair.

The detective courteously ushered his latest client from the office and to the elevator, gave him a quick hand-clasp, and left him with a parting injunction not only to hope for the best but to expect it.

Jerry had spoken no more than the simple truth when he had said that he felt greatly relieved at having shifted the burden of investigation to more capable shoulders. He was sincerely grateful to Peters for having suggested a private detective, and he fervently hoped that McKittrick would not insist upon the regular police being notified; that

meant notoriety and scandal, whereas Traynor, if he were to succeed in identifying the thief, impressed him as being a very human and sympathetic sort of a chap who would make no bones about calling off his hounds when requested and thereafter preserve a discreet silence about the whole affair. Under the beneficent influence of this new optimism Jerry actually caught himself half hoping that Sidney would prove to be the culprit; if he could be at once convicted of the crime and absolved from its punishment, then the incident might be used as a powerful lever to hoist him from the sticky quicksands of crime back to the straight and narrow path of righteousness. . . .

Jerry halted at the sight of a public telephone booth, striving to recall the duty it suggested. Then he remembered, and entering it hastily he called up his home; it was the butler who presently answered.

"Hello, Peters. Is there any fresh news?"

"Nothing at all, sir."

"Any message from Mr. Durant?"

"Not a word, sir."

"I've just engaged a detective, Peters. He seems

to take a rather hopeful view of things. . . . He will be out there shortly, and of course he's to have a free hand."

"Of course, sir. May I ask his name, sir?"

"Traynor, of Traynor, Foster and Henderson. And now call Mrs. Bronson to the 'phone, please."

After a short interval his wife's voice came to his ear, and when he had learned that the doctor had come again to see Cicely and pronounced her illness nothing more than a serious bilious attack, he repeated the information he had just given Peters. Mrs. Bronson seemed to welcome the news.

"What is he like, Jerry?"

"A nice enough chap, and presumably he has some ability."

"Young or old?"

"Quite young." He thought he heard a little sound of satisfaction from the receiver. "What did you say, dear?"

"Nothing, Jerry." There was a pause for a few seconds on the 'phone, and then her voice again; "I suppose you've heard nothing from Sidney?"

"Nothing from him, but something rather nice of him." He told her of his conversation with the

General Agent of the Universal, and of how highly Maitland had spoken of the boy.

"You know, Jerry, I've been wondering if you did quite right to refuse to help him in this last business? You don't suppose that *he* could have had anything to do with — with the ruby? If he needed — "

"Hush, dear! He never could have been so foolish! But we'll talk that over when I come home. Now I must ring off."

He left the booth a little less cheerful than he had entered it, sorry to have learned that Mary had begun to put two and two together for herself. He must do his best to keep her from sharing his own dark suspicions. . . .

He glanced about him as he entered the lunch-club and immediately spotted the familiar figure for which he sought. He lost no time in accosting the portly, red-faced gentleman.

"Good-morning, General."

"Good-morning, Bronson. How are you, sir?"

"Well, thank you. I've just been chatting with an acquaintance of yours."

"So? Who was that?"

"A man named Traynor — a private detective."

"Ah, yes." The General's eyes brightened. "Good man, Traynor. He discovered a string of pearls that had been taken from Mrs. Prescott's jewel-case tucked away as cosily as you please in the false bottom of her maid's trunk; it turned out afterwards that she was an old hand, but now they've got her where she won't find much to steal."

"Then you think him competent?"

"Absolutely." The ancient warrior pricked up his ears. "I hope it's nothing serious that has taken you to him?"

"Oh, no. A rather nice ruby is missing from my collection, but I daresay it will turn out to have been mislaid."

"I trust so," said the General politely.

A friend of his claimed his attention at this moment, and Jerry, once more in the clouds, betook himself into the dining-room and ordered a sumptuous luncheon; praise from Prescott was indeed a high honor, for the old boy was a bit of a fire-eater who was always more inclined to knock than to boost. Jerry ate with a good appetite, and, instead of going straight home as he had planned, he de-

cided to pay a brief visit to his office en route to the station.

In this he was wise, though the immediate result of his decision annoyed him excessively at the time. He arrived at the office to find Bartlett still absent on business, and learned that one of the firm's best customers had been telephoning steadily at intervals of fifteen minutes in the hope of getting a personal interview with one of its heads on a matter of pressing importance. Jerry Bronson sighed, but loyalty to the absent Pear demanded that he should sacrifice his personal affairs to their common interest, and when the patient client called up again his perseverance was rewarded — and Jerry spent the whole afternoon on a deal that promised to be as lucrative as it was complicated — and exasperating!

He did not catch a train to Claredale until half past six, and then he found a seat only in the smoking car — the last seat in the train — beside a very sporty looking individual in a striped collar, a tilted derby, an ancient suit of hand-me-downs, with a flashy diamond horse-shoe stuck in a peculiarly vivid neck-tie. The individual meant nothing to

Jerry, and he was quite unconscious of him as a companion.

Jerry opened the newspaper that he had bought from the crippled old woman at the entrance — opened it so carelessly and with so little concern for what he was doing that he did not realize he was reading the sporting page until he was startled by his neighbor's voice.

"Some race!" said the man genially.

"Eh?" said Mr. Bronson.

The sporty individual stabbed at the open newspaper with a forefinger that had seen better days. "The Middlevale Handicap. Won by Betsy Belle, a rank outsider — won by a whisker, sir, at 25 to 1. You don't get 'em like that every day!"

"No, I don't," admitted Jerry a little stiffly. He turned from the sporting news that did not interest him to the financial news that did. He noted with subdued pleasure that his securities were holding their own in a generally weak market, a circumstance that might prove useful to him when he was finally compelled to sacrifice something to meet the demands of Maybelle, McKittrick, and a private detective. . . .

In the present scheme of nature, which keeps a man's intelligence deplorably finite, he could not possibly know that his securities would ultimately prove of less value to him than the twinkling hoofs, the straining neck, and the winning whisker of that rank outsider, " Betsey Belle."

Chapter Eleven

JULIA SHAUGHNESSY

PETERS, after a good deal of thought, evolved a suitable telegram to California; he gave a sigh of relief as he finally shoved the completed message beneath the window of the clerk, and leaving the station, he strolled slowly homeward, his thoughts busy with the mystery of the ruby's disappearance.

The more he pondered Julia Shaughnessy's fainting fit the more it puzzled him. But Julia herself was something of a puzzle, for that matter, and he had caught himself wondering more than once, as on the first day he met her, why a strong, healthy young woman, not unattractive, should have incased herself in an armor of bitterness against the advances of society in general. In her devotion to Cicely, in the way she had petted and nursed a sick kitten that had strayed to the Bronson's door, and in her passionate attachment to a crippled sister in

England, of whom she frequently spoke, she had shown herself a woman of some kindliness; but these things were only the high-lights that called attention to the darkness of the whole picture, and, apart from them, she was morose, self-centered, and sarcastic to the point of acidity.

He dismissed the girl from his mind as being an enigma that was temporarily insoluble, and turned his thoughts instead to the consideration of Sidney Durant. Here was a nature easier to comprehend. The boy was unquestionably wild, and Peters, after the manner of butlers, had gleaned enough from meal-time conversations to know that he was mixed up with a rather fast crowd in the city. Also, he had picked up a pawn-ticket one morning in the front hall where it lay beneath a hat-rack. It was true that the ticket lay exactly between two raincoats, one of which had been worn by Sidney the previous evening and the other by Jerry Bronson, but Peters did not hesitate very long over the question of ownership; he had charitably restored the little green slip to one of Sidney's pockets and had never referred to the matter — and as Sidney had been equally reticent it was fair to

presume that the ticket had found its rightful owner. Since the young man drank, kept doubtful company, and depended upon two uncles to support him — Peters smiled at his atrocious pun — it was obvious that the boy's character was essentially weak. But was he weak enough to stoop to theft? It was plain from Bronson's manner that he thought so, but Peters confessed to himself that his own psychology was inadequate to determine the truth; he only knew that every crook must be innocent before he takes his first step on the pathway of crime, and that it was within the realms of possibility that Sidney had reached the degree of moral laxity that enabled him to take that first step, when opportunity offered, with perfect readiness and ease.

As for Mrs. Bronson, her grim ambition to get into Claredale society, her reckless gambling in secret defiance of her husband's prejudice, her dire need of money — would these things suffice to constitute a motive for theft? Peters thought they would, especially since she could count on her husband to shield her from open scandal in the event of her being caught. . . .

He was not sorry to reach the house at this point in his reflections, because he could not help suspecting her of the theft, and yet, for many reasons, was loath to believe her guilty. He was able to distract his thoughts from her as he entered the kitchen, where he found the cook alone. He hastened to inquire of Julia.

"Sure, she's upstairs lyin' down, poor gurrl, an' a nice lot o' work you've made for me, between you."

"How's that, Mrs. O'Malley?"

"What would it be but the breakfast dishes? Thirty-siven o' thim as I'm a livin' soul, not countin' the knives an' forks an' spoons, o' which there was three million each!"

"I'm sorry," said Peters with a disarming smile. "But you needn't have bothered to do them."

"Well, I'd no way of knowing when ye'd be back, or how soon the police would be here to put us all in jail, so I thought I'd give ye a hand."

"That was very kind of you, and I'll give you a piece of news in return. You needn't be afraid of going to jail just yet, no matter how much you deserve it, for Mr. Bronson has decided not to

notify the police. He's going to put the case in the hands of a private detective."

The innuendo as to her deserts would ordinarily have been as a red rag to a ready bull, but on this occasion Mrs. O'Malley was more interested in something else than the butler's teasing. She looked at him keenly.

"Faith, I'll be going upstairs in a minute to tell that to Julia! What do ye think was the first thing she said to me when she opened her eyes?"

"She looked into your face bending over her and said, 'Am I in heaven?'" answered Peters readily, having long since discovered that the best way to extract news from Mrs. O'Malley was to irritate her by a flippant indifference.

"And if she had, she'd have shown better manners than iver you did!" snorted the cook. "No, what she really said was, 'Have the police come yet?'"

"Gosh! That's a queer one! Did you ask her what she meant?"

"I did indade. She said she must have still been out of her head and that the reason she fainted was because it frightened her to think o' a burglar havin'

been in the house with the chance to kill us all in our slape."

"I expect that's the truth of it," said Peters, but to himself he added thoughtfully, "Pretty thin, Julia, pretty thin!" He turned again to the cook for further enlightenment. "Have you known her long?"

"It's the better part of three years since she came to the Bronsons'."

"She seems a nice, quiet sort of girl."

"She's nice enough for all that I know," answered Mrs. O'Malley judiciously. "But she's a queer one, is Julia, an' she never let's you get very close to her; she has her troubles like the rest of us, an' one o' thim is that sister of hers in Lunnon."

"Yes, I've heard her speak of her."

"Then you know she's younger than Julia, an' a cripple. It takes a good bit o' Julia's wages to pay for her keep, an' lately Julia's been grieving more than iver because she's heard of an operation that might cure her if only she had the money for the doctors."

"Oh — the *devil!*"

The words burst from his lips before he could

check them, and the cook, startled by this unwonted language in her kitchen, looked up to read Peters' thought in his face.

"Holy Mother forgive me!" she cried distressfully. "What am I after sayin'? Mr. Peters, I know what you're thinkin' but you'll surely not repeat that to a soul! Julia would niver turn her hand to such a dirty job even for her sister — ye'll not be doubtin' that, Mr. Peters!"

The butler scratched his smooth-shaven chin.

"I see you realize how bad it sounds, Mrs. O'-Malley. Lord knows, I don't want to get any poor girl in trouble with the law, but if I'm to keep still about what you've just told me, then you must keep still, too. Not that I expect our silence will do Julia much good, for detectives have a way of finding out these things for themselves. But you and I will talk about this again; now I must take my hat and coat upstairs and get to my silver."

He left the cook tearfully abusing herself for her unguarded confidences, and he did indeed take his coat and hat upstairs — but the silver got no attention that morning.

He had to pass Julia's room to reach his own,

and he noticed that the girl's door was tightly closed. While he smoothed his hair and put on his house clothes, he could hear her moving about on the other side of the partition-wall with a quick step suggestive of restlessness, and he would have given much to know what was passing in her mind. He finished his brief toilet, stepped into the hall — and smelled smoke!

At the same moment, his quick eye detected a thin gray spiral that stole from Julia's door-sill and dissipated itself as it ascended into the draughty hall. . . .

"Julia!" He reached the door in one bound and twisted the knob, only to find the door locked; he did not stop to weigh the pros and cons of the matter, but fearful for the safety of the girl and perhaps of the whole house, he drew back and then thrust his powerful shoulder against the panels. The flimsy lock gave so suddenly that he nearly measured his length on the floor inside.

A single glance around him sufficed to set his fear at rest. The window of Julia's room was wide open, so that the girl herself was in no danger of suffocation, and the smoke that had alarmed him came

from nothing more serious than a small heap of papers smouldering in a wash-bowl. Julia herself was pressed against the farther wall as though frightened by his abrupt entrance, yet the expression in her eyes was less one of fear than of sullen defiance. A little of this died away as their glances met.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" she said shortly. She left the supporting wall and advanced a few steps with a creditable air of nonchalance. "You gave me a rare turn."

"That seems to be the best thing I do to-day," he answered quietly. He picked up a water-jug that stood near him, but when he stepped toward the wash-bowl he saw that the fire had been extinguished by the compactness of the fuel itself. He noticed casually that this appeared to consist of a number of letters, and one legal-looking document with a red seal showing where the heat had curled up a corner. "What are you doing, Julia? Playing bonfires?"

"I was just burning some old papers," she said, apparently reassured by his light manner. "Sure, I never dreamed they'd make such a smoke."

"Julia," he began gently, "we've not known

each other very long, but I'd like you to believe that I'm your friend. You've done some things to-day that seem to need explaining, and it's easy to see that you've something on your mind. Don't you think it might help you if you told your troubles to someone?"

She was taken aback by the abruptness of his proposal; as he started to speak she regarded him suspiciously, but, by the time he had finished, her eyes had left his grave face and had shifted their gaze to the soft, misty hills that were visible in the distance through her window. She did not answer for nearly a minute, while he waited with exemplary patience to see how she accepted his tacit offer of himself as a confidant. At last she turned her head quickly from the window and looked him full in the face.

"I need help badly enough, Mr. Peters, but if I tell you why, and if I believe in your friendship, will you promise never to go with it to — to the police, or anyone else? I must know, Mr. Peters, just how you stand before I tell you anything."

"I'll promise you nothing in the dark," he answered sternly, "but I will promise you this, Julia;

whatever you tell me I'll keep secret unless I'm sure that I can speak it out for your own good."

Again the quick suspicion flared in her eyes, and again it died away. This time she was silent for so long that he believed his appeal had been made in vain, and then, without any introduction, she looked out to the hills and began her story in a voice so low that at times he could barely catch her bitter words.

Goodness knows, he hardly needed to hear more than a few of them to understand the rest! It was a sufficiently sordid narrative, and one that is tragically familiar in every police court in the world.

It told first of a weak, improvident father, of a cruel step-mother, of two half-starved children who received daily beatings that increased in severity until the spine of the younger victim was injured permanently. Of course the father died, and of course the two girls, still scarcely more than children, soon found themselves pitched into the filthy sea of London misery to sink or swim as an indifferent Providence might decree. The younger girl was nearly helpless, and the support of the two fell upon the shoulders of the other, who received an oc-

casional wage cleverly based on the smallest sum that would keep one person.

The drab years passed in squalid procession with never a break in their dull monotony; the crippled child required more and more care and the other grew more and more sullenly disheartened. Then came the day when temptation literally landed at Julia's feet; she was in a crowd of hurrying shoppers when she saw a well-dressed woman drop a purse that struck the sidewalk with a pleasant chink, and, like a flash, the girl had stooped and whipped it up beneath her shawl. The woman did not seem to notice her loss, and, for one blissful minute, the girl believed herself safe; then came the grip on her arm that spelt ruin! A detective had noticed her pick up the pocket-book, had waited to see if she would return it to the owner, and then had done his duty. The woman, apprised of the incident, had proved relentless. . . .

"And they gave me three years just for that," said Julia somberly, "and while I was gone they put Molly in an institution that ate the very heart out of her."

Julia's description of her experience in prison

was terse but vivid, and Peters shuddered at some of her naked phrasing. It was plain that jail had left an indelible mark upon her spirit — and no wonder!

Good conduct reduced her term to two years and a half, and when she came out she was helped by a prisoners' aid society to obtain a situation as a servant. It was the first regular employment she had ever had — she owed that to the jail at least! — and for a while she throve mightily on her small but steady wage. Molly, entirely helpless now, was moved from the institution to a cheap room that was still her own.

In this ointment of society there was, of course, the usual fly. Julia learned what the prison taint means to a girl working in a self-righteous community, and she was soon planning the only means of escape that appeared open to her. She hoarded her pennies desperately, and at last she had enough for a steerage passage to America, land of hope, where she dreamed of better wages among people ignorant of her past.

At this point she brought her story swiftly up to date. That morning when Peters had come into the kitchen with his news of a burglary her first, and

paralyzing, thought had been that the police would discover her record and immediately fasten the blame on her. That was why she had fainted. . . .

Later, while lying in mute agony on her bed, it had occurred to her that she must, above all things, destroy some letters that she had kept since Molly had written them to her in prison. These, and the testimonial of the prisoner's aid society, which well-meant document by itself would damn her in the eyes of anyone who read it — ! She rose from her bed, dumped the papers into the wash-bowl and touched a match to the lot.

" That's the whole of it," she ended passionately, " and so help me Heaven, I never knew the ruby was in the house, much less took it! "

" I believe you, Julia."

The words came out impulsively, and Peters was more than half-startled as he realized to what he was committing himself. It was his turn to stare out of the window, and he did it at some length while he mused over the story he had just heard. The girl had been very convincing, but . . . " Police persecution " and " every man's against me " was old stuff — terribly old. Sentiment aside, a

theft had been committed in this house and here was a girl under the same roof, who, whatever temptation might have excused her, had already served one term for theft. That was the most obvious side of the shield, and on the other was — what?

Something brushed warmly against his ankle, and looking down he found the answer to his question. A sickly little kitten! Not a weighty piece of evidence in a court of law, but what sane man could want more? The butler, his doubts resolved, smiled whimsically at the hills, and the hills seemed to smile back at him. He stooped and obligingly scratched the kitten behind its ear, then he straightened and turned to Julia.

"Well," she demanded, "what are you going to do?"

"Come along and watch me, if you want," he replied cheerfully.

He crossed the room, and she started to her feet in alarm as he picked up the washbowl full of charred papers.

"Don't worry," he said reassuringly. "You see, there will be a detective here pretty soon, if I'm not mistaken, and I think it will be just as well if we

take these things out in the garden and really burn them before he learns things — that he need never know! "

He half expected her to show some sign of gratitude and relief; he would not have been surprised if she had expressed her thanks in a few well-chosen words. But he was not at all prepared to see Julia fling herself prone upon her bed and burst into wild sobs. . . .

He made but an awkward figure as he stood there watching her heaving shoulders, a washbowl clutched to his breast and a puzzled expression on his face that might have been freely translated, " You never know what they'll do next! "

Chapter Twelve

STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL

THE boldest course is nearly always the best; when Julia tried to burn her papers in secret behind a locked door she promptly attracted the attention of the butler. Peters made no such mistake; he marched brazenly out of the house with the washbowl held before him, and as the cook happened to be in the cellar as he passed through the kitchen, and Pietro, the gardener, had gone home to lunch, he felt sure that he had come thus far unobserved. He burned every scrap of the incriminating documents behind the garage, threw the ashes to the winds, and restored the basin to Julia's room with the same comfortable feeling of security.

Joan had brought back the medicine for Cicely and had then driven off again; she presently telephoned that she was staying to lunch at a friend's house, and as Cicely was kept in bed as a precaution,

Mrs. Bronson lunched alone in the big dining-room. Peters, silently attentive at the other end of the room, scrutinized her face from time to time and found in it further food for suspicion; she naturally did not trouble to wear a mask in the presence of her butler, and he thought he had never before seen her so obviously anxious and troubled, so plainly worried. He couldn't just see why she should look so woe-begone if she had managed to steal a ruby, unless she was tortured with remorse, or unless it had finally occurred to her that even a woman of her position could not dispose of such a gem without leaving a broad trail for some keen detective to nose out.

Peters ran over the points he had against her. She had had a powerful motive to take the ruby, she had had the opportunity — in fact, she was the first person to enter the library after Jerry left it, and it might therefore be said that she had had a better opportunity than anyone else in the house to take advantage of her husband's carelessness. Had she noticed the ruby lying on the desk and yielded to an irresistible temptation? He could imagine her condoning her action with the reflection

that the jewel was shortly to be hers anyway and that she was consequently merely robbing herself. In the moment that elapsed between her hanging up the receiver and her appearance in the hall, she had had time to remember that even the discovery of her theft would only result in a painful scene with her husband, who could be counted upon to shield her from open disgrace and punishment. She might have gone on to think, supposing her to be sufficiently callous, that suspicion would be directed instantly to Sidney — which was exactly what had happened, at least on Jerry's part.

And when she did appear — ! Peters, in his mind, saw her again as he had seen her on the previous evening; he remembered her agitation, that he had ascribed to maternal anxiety, her leaning against the wall as if for support, and, above all, he remembered the clenched hand that hung by her side, half-concealed in a fold of her dress.

"Some more butter, please."

Found derelict in his duty, he sprang to obey, not displeased that his attention had been distracted once again from the subject of his suspicions. He mutely cursed the luck that seemed to be making

him the treasury of so many secrets, and while he had disposed of Julia's case with ready decision, it was a different matter to render the same service to Mrs. Bronson; besides, there was no sick kitten to plead for her! On the other hand, the idea of going to kindly Jerry with such a tale about his wife was literally abhorrent to the butler's nature.

The telephone summoned him to the library; it was Bronson with his tale of having engaged a detective, and in another minute Peters came back to notify Mrs. Bronson that she was wanted at the receiver. She had finished her lunch and returned to the dining-room only for a word with the butler, who did not fail to note that she seemed more upset than ever.

"Mr. Bronson told you that a detective will be here shortly?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I shall be in my room all the afternoon, and I want you to let me know the minute he comes."

"Very good, ma'am."

It was barely two hours later when a ring at the front door announced the arrival of Traynor. The butler answered it with his accustomed swiftness,

and, for just an instant, the two men exchanged appraising glances.

"You're Peters, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm Mr. Traynor. Did Mr. Bronson 'phone I was coming?"

"Yes, sir, and Mrs. Bronson has been waiting to see you."

"Then please tell her I'm here." The detective strolled into the house and looked about him with interest. "You may as well show me into the library — that's where the jewel was taken? — and I'll have a look around while I'm waiting."

Peters obeyed him cheerfully, rather pleased with his first impression of this clever-looking young man. He showed him into the library, called his attention to the empty jewel-case that still stood on Jerry's desk, and departed to summon Mrs. Bronson.

Left to himself, Traynor went to work with all the promptness and some of the methods of the most approved fiction detective. He looked all around the room in which he stood, noting the character and position of every piece of furniture it contained, and then walked to the desk. His head

was bent over the jeweler's case, which he was examining through a pocket magnifying glass, when Peters stepped in to say that Mrs. Bronson would join him in a minute.

"All right, Peters."

The butler turned as if to leave the room, but, before doing so, he was guilty of an instant's hesitation that spoke volumes to the detective's trained intelligence.

"One moment, Peters. You look to me like a man who has something on his mind. Have you anything to tell me about this case?"

His shrewd guess was quickly rewarded. The doubts and qualms that had been assailing the butler since that morning were crystallized by Traynor's question into a sudden determination. Peters decided to trust his suspicions to this kindly-eyed, pleasant-voiced young sleuth, thereby shifting a certain problem from his own wits to another's.

"There *is* something, Mr. Traynor, but before I tell you what it is I would like to ask you a question. There is someone in this house who had a good reason for stealing that ruby; if I tell you the details, sir, will you be obliged to repeat them at once

to Mr. Bronson — or would you consider the information as confidential until you had satisfied yourself as to its importance?"

Traynor smiled encouragingly.

"I can assure you, Peters, that every detective receives communications of just that sort, and — if you don't mind my saying so — they are apt to turn out valueless. Yours may be an exception, so if you wish to tell me I will be glad to be saved the trouble of finding it out for myself, and if it turns out to have no actual bearing on the case you can depend upon me to keep your secret."

"I'll take your word for it, sir." The butler stepped swiftly to the door and made sure there was no possibility of their being overheard; he returned to the detective's side. "It's about Mrs. Bronson —"

In a few terse sentences he described the bridge debt; the woman's lack of money; her husband's antipathy to gambling; her errand to the library the previous evening; and her curious behavior when she left the room.

"And you don't want to tell these things to your employer for fear of giving him unnecessary pain?"

The detective looked at his informant thoughtfully. "The sentiment does you great credit, Peters! What you have told me is extremely interesting, but you have no fear of my disturbing Mr. Bronson unless I become quite certain that she is the guilty person." He added smiling, "I am never unnecessarily brutal!"

"Then I'm very glad I have told you," said the butler, and left the room just a few seconds before Mrs. Bronson appeared.

She had dressed herself with exquisite care for this interview, which she felt might prove vitally important to her; she made a delightful picture as she glided gracefully into the room and approached her visitor with outstretched hand and charming smile.

"Mr. Traynor? I am so glad you have come! We are all waiting confidently for you to get us out of this tiresome mess."

"I hope I shall justify your expectations," he answered with a smile quite as charming as her own. "In fact I may tell you at once that I have every hope of recovering the ruby."

"And of — of exposing the thief?"

"Ah — that is sometimes another matter," he said significantly.

"You mean — ?"

"I mean," he continued in a more natural tone, "that I am a private detective and not a police official. I have solved many cases of theft in which the identity of the thief remained a secret — a family secret, I might say!"

"Oh!" She appeared to ponder his words, but in reality she was nerving herself to take the plunge into the doubtful waters of confession. "Er — Mr. Traynor!"

"Yes, Mrs. Bronson?"

"I suppose in cases like this you try to find some person with — with a motive for the theft?"

"Cases like this?" He raised his eyebrows.

"Why, I gathered from what my husband told me this morning that it looks like what you call — an inside job."

"I haven't called it that," he reminded her smilingly. "But if it is, then your premise is sound; to put it roughly, one might say that motive would count for fifty per cent and opportunity for the other fifty."

She had seated herself in one of the big leather chairs, while he had preferred to remain standing before her. She leaned forward now, her folded hands clutching her knee, and raised anxious eyes to his.

"Mr. Traynor, I had both motive and opportunity," she said in a low voice. "I pay you the compliment of supposing that you would learn this by your own methods, so I would rather tell you the truth than —"

"My dear Mrs. Bronson!" He checked her with a courteous gesture. "I don't believe for an instant that you would let your bridge debts drive you to such a desperate expedient for obtaining money."

"Mr. Traynor!" She sprang to her feet, pale and frightened. "What *do* you mean?"

"Don't you owe some people named Latham about two thousand dollars?"

"Ye-es — I do!" she admitted. "But how in the world have you come to hear of it? Don't — don't tell me that my husband — oh, surely he doesn't know!"

"He is quite in the dark about it."

"Thank Heaven!" She drew a quick breath of

relief, but her slender body was still shaking in every limb as she sank back again into the chair. "But how in the world did you learn — ?"

"You must forgive me if I don't tell you that just now. A detective would soon lose his subtle fascination if he were to turn his bag of tricks inside out upon request!" His cheerful voice and light words had the reassuring effect he intended. "Don't worry, Mrs. Bronson; I can see that the idea of taking me into your confidence has been causing you anxiety, but that bridge is crossed and no great harm done after all! I certainly won't tell your husband about those ten cent points, and I'm quite sure you didn't take the ruby."

He talked a moment or two longer, putting her more at ease, and then asked carelessly, "By the way, have you any idea yourself as to who may have taken the stone — providing that it *is* an inside job?"

Her answer was a moment in coming.

"Well — one doesn't like to mention names for fear of doing an injustice, Mr. Traynor. Peters seems to be an honest, steady man, but don't you think it rather odd that he should bring a valuable

ruby here without the knowledge of Mr. McKittrick, and that it should immediately disappear?"

"Peters has naturally occurred to me; but don't you see there are several implausibilities about that theory?"

"N-no." She looked a little crestfallen, as an amateur detective must when confronted with the incredulity of a professional. "I can't say I do; what are they?"

"In the first place, the whole mechanism of the theft would have been a great deal too elaborate, and a man capable of conceiving such a scheme would have brains enough to know that his actions would not be above suspicion — I daresay Peters is feeling rather uncomfortable right now as he considers the interpretation we may put on his bringing the ruby here under such curious circumstances! But if he had wanted to rob McKittrick, he could have done so quite as effectively in the vacant apartment and then taken his time in arranging the apparent traces of a burglarious entry; he need not have gone to the trouble of staging the theft here.

"Supposing that he did, he could not have counted on your husband taking possession of the

ruby — which was Mr. Bronson's own suggestion — much less have counted on his forgetting to put it in the safe and leaving it on his desk, for the convenience of the first crook who came along. If on the other hand he was prepared to crack the strongbox in order to secure it, he would have tackled the safe last night and possessed himself of your husband's rubies, rather than stopped short with a lucky find.

"Supposing, once again, that he did, it must have been sheer idiocy or sheer bravado that prompted him this morning to find every door and window as he left it, when he might have forced a catch and turned our attention outside the house — instead of in. No, Mrs. Bronson, I don't think we are justified in suspecting Peters in the face of all these facts."

"I suppose you're right," she commented reluctantly.

"You may be sure I am," he asserted, and added briskly, "Now may I have your permission to commence the more mechanical part of my investigations? As for yourself, you are naturally nervous over this whole business, and if I were a doctor I

would prescribe a sedative, — and a nap; I shall be here some time, and if I have to ask you anything I can do it later."

"Thank you, Mr. Traynor, you are really very thoughtful." She managed a rather quivery smile as she stood up. "Of course my husband's orders are that you shall have a free hand."

"You may trust me to use my powers with discretion," was his last reassuring speech as he bowed her from the room.

He stood looking after her for a moment or two, a curious little smile on his lips but none at all in his eyes. Then he touched the bell for the butler. "Peters, I'd like to have a look over the house — particularly the servants' quarters."

"I thought you would, sir. I can say for the cook and housemaid, as well as for myself, that we are all willing and anxious for you to make a thorough search of all our belongings."

"Good! It is always a tremendous help when people realize the necessity of these things and accept them philosophically. Many things have to be done at a time like this that cause inconvenience. Please tell your companions that I'm sorry to dis-

turb their possessions, but that I'll be as quick and neat about it as possible."

"Nothing could be fairer than that, sir."

"Before we start, Peters, I want to ask a question or two about the family. Miss Ayres, for instance — she's Mrs. Bronson's cousin?"

"Yes, sir."

"What relation does that make her to young Durant?"

"None at all, sir. He is Mr. Bronson's nephew."

"Ah!" The detective seemed vaguely disappointed, but aroused himself to answer the surprise that had been apparent in the butler's voice. "It's nothing important, but it's always just as well to find out the exact relationships existing between the characters who have a part in these little dramas."

"I see, sir."

"Are these young people on good terms with each other?"

"I should say so, sir."

"For that matter, are you aware of any friction between any of the members of the family — any misunderstanding, or lack of harmony?"

"None at all, sir. It seems to be a most united household!"

The butler answered warmly, but Traynor merely smiled and made no comment.

"Come along, Peters, and let's get this over with." He followed as the butler led the way.

Jerry Bronson, detained by his real estate deal, was much later than usual in reaching home. Dinner had been waiting some fifteen minutes before the alert butler flung open the front door at the sound of his approaching footsteps.

"Good-evening, sir."

"Good-evening, Peters." Jerry looked tired and worn. "I suppose there's no sign of that confounded ruby?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Traynor been here?"

"He's here yet, sir — in the library with Mrs. Bronson. He is remaining to dinner, sir."

"Good. He had a look around, no doubt?"

"He went over the whole house pretty thoroughly, sir."

"H'm. Find anything?"

"Nothing important, sir." A slight smile re-

laxed the butler's face. "He found a policeman's whistle, sir, which I understand you hid the day after Miss Cicely brought it home from a party."

"A policeman's whistle!" snorted Jerry. "That's the sort of thing that would turn up just *after* a burglary! Does she know it's found?"

"No, sir."

"Well, that's something. Better hide it again, if you value your ear-drums. Hello — what's this?"

This was a boy on a bicycle who had ridden up as they stood talking on the veranda. He had a yellow envelope in his hand, and the broker snatched the message eagerly. "For you, Peters," he said glancing at the inscription, and the butler opened the telegram while Jerry signed the boy's book.

"Is it from McKittrick? Pretty quick work! What does he say?"

"I'd prefer you to read it for yourself, sir!" answered the butler, and remained standing rather stiffly at attention while Bronson glanced over the message.

"Certainly employ a private detective. Have no

wish to publish fact I was ass enough to leave my jewelry where a bigger ass could reach it."

Jerry read it twice, and then placed it slowly in his pocket.

"Gad!" he muttered feelingly. "Do you suppose he means you or me, Peters?"

"He's just the sort of man, sir, to suggest we toss for it!" replied the butler drily.

Chapter Thirteen

PETERS GETS A SHOCK

JOAN had apparently deserted her home. Following her absence from lunch, she had telephoned again to say that she would not be back for dinner; Jerry regretted this fact at intervals through the meal, for Traynor, as might have been expected, proved himself a most entertaining conversationalist. He answered an early remark of Mrs. Bronson's with a declaration that he would discuss any case except this, which he said was already preying on their minds, and he proved as good as his word. From soup to coffee he interrupted his steady flow of anecdote only to pay due justice to Mrs. O'Malley's art.

Jerry led him into the library after dinner and supplied him with an excellent cigar; drink he refused, insisting that he reserved that dissipation until the conclusion of his cases.

"I'd like to know if you've formed any opinion, Mr. Traynor."

"I can hardly—" began the detective, when Jerry bethought him of something else, and raised his hand.

"Excuse me, Mr. Traynor! Can you think of any reason why Peters should not join us here? He is no less interested than I in the recovery of the ruby, and he's a bright fellow who may think of something useful himself."

"Have him in by all means. Three heads are better than two."

"First, I'll show you this." Jerry drew McKittrick's telegram from his pocket and handed it to Traynor. "Read it!"

The detective did so, and gave it back with a laugh.

"Rough on Peters, but no more than he deserved! However, I am glad that you've been authorized to employ me, for I need hardly assure you that I prefer to work on a case of this kind without any interference from the police." He added quickly. "Not that there is a finer body of men in the world than our police, but even their

best friends will admit that they are better at making arrests than in detective work."

The butler was summoned and showed obvious pleasure at learning that he was to be kept in touch with developments. He demurred a little at the idea of sitting down, but he eventually yielded to Jerry's insistence, and presently seemed as much at ease as either of his companions.

"Now, Mr. Traynor," said Jerry, just as the detective had encouraged him earlier in the day.

A shadow of impatience crossed the detective's face but it was instantly replaced by his usual good-humored expression.

"I'm afraid, sir, that you expect me to reveal to you at once the present location of the ruby, the identity of the thief, and the motive that impelled him to theft."

"Oh, not quite as much as that!" replied the broker, returning Traynor's smile. "But we" — he graciously included Peters — "are very anxious to know what progress you have made."

"Well, I have accumulated a mass of information the importance of which I cannot determine until I've had an opportunity to think it over.

"I can tell you this much, that I found nothing either useful or suspicious in my search of the house. A few suggestive things, perhaps . . . I won't discuss them now, and shall reserve my investigation of them until other clues fail."

"I think I should tell you that I believe the servants to be innocent of any connection with the disappearance of the ruby. Mrs. O'Malley is transparently honest, that is certain. Julia Shaughnessy is less open but — let me see, how long has she been with you?"

"About three years."

"Just so, and Mrs. Bronson tells me that her references were good Apart from that, I gather from Mrs O'Malley, and from Peters here, that the girl is of a retiring, self-centered nature, that she shows no desire to make friendships outside the house, and that instead of going out on her days off, she frequently spends the time in her own room writing to a younger sister in England These things would seem to dispose of the chance that she may have met some crook outside and become his tool; as for the possibility of her having taken it for herself, she does not impress me as being the sort

of a girl to take an interest in a ruby, even if she knew how to go about disposing of one. Yes," mused Traynor, "I think we can give Julia a clean bill of health. As for our friend Peters, I expect we shall have to assume his innocence until we can prove him guilty."

"Thank you, sir," acknowledged Peters imperturbably.

Jerry Bronson, busy with his own gloomy thoughts, did not smile at this last exchange of pleasantries.

"Mr. Traynor, am I to understand from the way you speak that you believe the theft was committed by someone in this house?"

"Mr. Bronson, I can only say that the evidence points that way up to the present. I realize what a shock this must be to you, and I hope as sincerely as you do that appearances are misleading and that we will yet find a professional crook at the end of our hunt."

A short silence followed upon his words, and Traynor and the butler looked away while Bronson obviously tried to control his emotion. A quick tap on the door startled them, but it proved a wel-

come diversion. Peters opened it, and stood aside to permit Joan to enter.

"Can I come in, Cousin Jerry?"

"Of course, if you like. We were just talking over this wretched affair. . . . Joan, this is Mr. Traynor."

She bowed slightly.

"It is Mr. Traynor whom I really wish to see," she said. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes dangerously bright, and it was plain to all of them that her nerves were strung to the highest pitch. "Cousin Jerry, would you mind very much if I ask to speak to Mr Traynor — alone?"

"Just as you wish, my dear," answered the ever courteous Jerry, but he was evidently surprised and a trifle hurt. "Do you want to talk to him right away?"

"If you'll let me. I want to get it over and be off to bed." She took a cigarette from the box on Jerry's desk, lit it, and puffed at it nervously for a moment. "I've had the *hell* of a day!" she burst out suddenly, irritably.

The explosion of a firecracker in his cigar would not have caused Jerry Bronson to jump in his skin

as did this unexpected adjective from a charming young lady, and even Traynor's eyebrows went up in mild surprise. It was a gurgling gasp from Peters, choking back a chuckle, that eased the situation; the others turned to him with one accord, and his purpling face and painful self-consciousness were too much for them. They exploded in a gale of laughter that left them breathless, while Peters, giving up the unequal struggle, fled the room in dismay.

That laugh did them all a world of good, coming as it did to relieve their pent-up feelings.

"I don't care!" cried Joan defiantly, when she could speak "I only told the truth in good old Anglo-Saxon."

She was more like her usual self by the time Jerry had left her alone with the detective, who proceeded tactfully to give her every chance to calm down. He drew up a comfortable chair, placed cushions behind her, set an ash-tray close to her hand, routed out a foot-stool from a distant corner, and then decided that she had had plenty of time to regain her self-control. He took up the same position in which he had listened to Mrs. Bron-

son that afternoon, standing before her with his hands thrust deeply in his pockets and his eyes searching her face not unkindly.

"Why was it the hell of a day?" he asked lightly.

"Because I've been making up my mind to do something hateful."

"It's not difficult under the circumstances to guess what it is," he helped out, as she paused. "You know something about this business and you don't like to reveal it for fear of hurting someone dear to you, but you have finally determined to do the sensible thing — which means your plain duty — and confide in me. Am I right?"

She nodded soberly, and her opinion of the young man's cleverness was increased by that terse and accurate summing up of her long day's struggle.

"I never could have found the courage to — to tell Cousin Jerry, but Mrs. Bronson has just been telling me about her talk with you this afternoon, and that put the idea of coming to you in — in confidence."

"Quite so, and I promise not to breathe a word of it unless it has some bearing on the case; in that

event, Miss Ayres, things must take their regular course and you will have to console yourself with the reflection that you are not the first person by a long shot who has found herself in just this disagreeable situation."

"That's a thin consolation," said the girl, and made a face. "But Cousin Mary has practically forced my hand by coming to you with the story of her silly bridge debts. You might never have learned about them otherwise, but now you'll never be able to forget that she had a motive for stealing a valuable ruby, and before you start to suspect her—" he raised a protesting hand—"Oh, you might, you know! Anyway, I've no right to let you do that as long as I know something about somebody else."

"Two to one it's Sidney," offered Mr. Traynor cheerfully, hoping to ease the strain that was again becoming apparent in her eyes.

"Yes, it *is!*" she admitted desperately.

Without further circumlocution, she nerved herself to give a clear direct account of her brief interview with Sidney, in that very room, when he had threatened his uncle's safe with a can-opener.

"I told him it was a silly, stupid thing to say!" she ended angrily.

"No doubt he agreed with you there?"

"N-no," she answered, a catch in her voice. "He — he only said he knew I'd never give him away! Oh!" she cried passionately. "I feel a perfect Judas!"

"You needn't," he told her shortly. He moved away from her and fell to pacing the floor, his shrewd face very thoughtful, but her impatience could not wait upon his mood.

"Do — do you think things look very bad for him?"

"They unquestionably do," he returned. "But remember this, Miss Ayres; the blacker the case grows against him, the more difficult it is to understand how a man of Sidney's intelligence could invite destruction by committing such a stupid theft — of which he must have realized that he, above all others, was most likely to be suspected. Do you see my point?"

"Of course!" She brightened perceptibly.

"When Durant talked to you, did he give you any idea of the kind of a scrape he was in?"

"No, except that he needed twenty-five hundred dollars to get himself out of it."

"Ah. Well, it would not be becoming in me to tell you his secrets, but I will say this much: his need for the money is extremely pressing — and a ruby is not an easy thing to convert into cash in a hurry without leaving a trail that a — a policeman could follow! He must have known that, so there is another point for us to consider before we fix the guilt on him."

Joan was a little bewildered by the new complexion that Traynor was industriously painting upon the face of things. "But these facts would appear to exonerate him completely unless he was an absolute fool — which Sidney decidedly is not!"

"That is so," agreed the detective. He refrained from reminding her of Sidney's midnight departure for New York, a curious, if not suspicious incident; he did not point out to her, as he might have, that among the fast company the boy was known to keep in New York he might possibly have learned of — or even met — some fence who would pay him a bargain price for the ruby and keep it until danger was well passed. Traynor, as he had assured the

butler, was not brutal unless he had to be, and he saw no reason for arousing in Joan's mind any further doubt of Sidney. "Anything else, Miss Ayres?"

"Y-yes. There is one thing more I must tell you. You know, little Cicely was ill that night and I sat up with her until early morning. At about one o'clock I heard a noise down here, and I stole half way down the stairs to see what it was. I leaned over the banisters —"

"And saw Peters!" interrupted the detective.

"Why — ! How did you guess that?"

"Didn't guess it. We were talking this afternoon about the people who might have entered the library last night, and he told me of his excursion there."

"Thank goodness!" said Joan. "That's one person I haven't hurt by my tale-bearing!"

"He explained that he had been unable to sleep and had gone to get a book your cousin had given him permission to borrow."

Joan jumped at the chance to appease her curiosity.

"I saw he had a book in his hand — what was it, Mr. Traynor?"

"Sartor Resartus."

"Sar — !" In her surprise Joan collapsed against the cushion behind her. Then she caught the detective's amused eye, and they both laughed. "I have thought once or twice that he was trying to improve his mind," she confessed, "but I didn't suppose he'd go that far!"

"Peters," mused Traynor, "has a personality that I find intriguing."

His tone drew a quick glance from Joan. "You — you don't think — ?"

"No, no! My interest in Peters is personal, not professional. And now, Miss Ayres, any more confidences?"

"No, that's all."

"Then let me remind you that you are anxious to get to bed after the — er — hell of a day!" He walked to the door and opened it as she rose and crossed the room. "Don't stay awake a single minute worrying about what you have told me. You did exactly right, and you have perhaps helped Durant rather than hurt him. There is a comforting idea for you to fall asleep on!"

The girl held out her hand impulsively.

"You are very kind, Mr. Traynor," she said quickly. "Good-night!"

"Good-night, Miss Ayres." He released her hand and watched her graceful figure disappearing down the hall, and on his face was the same mirthless smile with which he had similarly honored Mrs. Bronson's retreating form. It faded from his lips as Jerry, aware from the opening of the door that the conference was ended, came in from the veranda where he had spent half an hour in miserable solitude.

"Ah, Mr. Bronson!" A glance at the broker's face was enough to give the detective a clue to his thoughts. "Let me hasten to tell you that Miss Ayres had very little of importance to tell me. She is much happier now that she has got it off her mind — and of course you have guessed that her only reason for wishing to see me alone was to spare you pain."

"Bless her! That is just like her!"

"So I should imagine," agreed the other cordially. "An honest, straightforward, kind-hearted girl." The broker's gloom lightened at this praise of Joan. "Now, sir, if you'll excuse me, I must be getting

back to town. If you will be in your office tomorrow afternoon about four I will call on you there; undoubtedly I shall have news for you."

"I'll be there!" declared Jerry promptly.

He did not accompany the detective to the front door, and so it happened that Traynor found himself alone in the front hall with the attentive butler, who had turned up with hat and stick for the parting guest.

"Excuse me, sir," he said in a low voice. "There is something I should like to ask you."

"Go ahead, Peters."

"Once or twice since this afternoon it has struck me that Mrs. Bronson was looking at me a little queerly; you didn't let her guess that I mentioned her bridge debts to you?"

"Of course not!" cried the detective. "By the way, Peters, I may as well tell you that she confessed them to me herself, and—" He broke off and whistled softly. "By Jove! Now that I think of it, I did cut her story short by telling her that I already knew the facts! But I naturally refused to say where I got them."

Peters felt the dawning of an uncomfortable sus-

picion; he guessed that this young man had come very close indeed to betraying a confidence in order to impress Mrs. Bronson with his omniscience, and the butler's tone was slightly lacking in deference when he spoke again.

"I expect I've only been imagining things, sir; I daresay she will think you found it out for yourself. Lots of people believe that a detective must know everything."

Traynor flushed.

"And lots of other people, my friend, are sometimes surprised to find out how many things he does know."

"No doubt, sir."

"Would you like a sample of my wares, Peters?" The detective had recovered the better part of his equanimity, but there was still a bite in his words. "I believe I can surprise you by something I know."

"Possibly, sir."

"I believe it will surprise you," went on the other deliberately, "when you hear that I know you burned a quantity of papers belonging to Julia Shaughnessy behind the garage this morning."

Peters, prepared for almost anything else, was

fairly staggered by the unexpectedness of Traynor's challenge; he recovered slowly, to find the detective eyeing him sardonically. "How the deuce — ?" He paused, pulled himself together, and met Traynor's level gaze with as straight a one of his own. "Why, yes, sir, I did just that thing!"

"Perhaps you will be so good as to tell me to what those papers referred?"

"No, sir, I shan't do that."

"Ah! I didn't think you would," admitted Traynor. He tapped his trousers lightly with his cane. "It's not important, for I expect I shall soon find out for myself."

He turned and left the house without another word, and Peters, regrettable to state, shut the heavy door upon his departing figure with a shade more of emphasis than a well-trained butler should allow himself. He pacified his conscience, however, with the reflection that it had been a long and trying day. . . .

Chapter Fourteen

INTRODUCING T. B. H.

THE morning mail brought news of the absent Sidney, which arrived in the form of a letter written by him on the stationery of his club and postmarked from the Grand Central Station just prior to the time his train had left for Mainesville. It was cheerful in tone, describing the significance of the Universal intrusting him with such an important mission, apologizing for having failed to telephone the day before, and ending with the statement that he would probably be detained up-state at least ten days before his business was completed.

Jerry's heart sank a little at this last bit of news, but rose again on the recollection that Traynor had sent one of his discreet young men to "cover" Sidney; therefore it might not be necessary to wait ten whole days before getting some hint or suggestion that might cast light on whether or not the boy was concerned in the disappearance of the ruby.

Before he left the house for his usual train, Jerry had a word with the butler.

"How does Traynor impress you, Peters?"

"I think he's a very clever young man," answered Peters, a trifle grudgingly.

Candor compelled him to say as much, for he had just spent a very bad night indeed in reluctant contemplation of that same cleverness. Traynor's parting shot had well-nigh crippled the butler's imagination. How the deuce had he learned about those papers?

Traynor had not been out of Peters' sight for one moment during his visit to the house on the previous day, and at no time had he gone near the garage behind whose concealing walls the well-intentioned burnt offering had been made. Even if he had gone over the outer premises before coming to the front door, it was impossible that he could have identified a scattered handful of ashes as papers belonging to Julia — Peters had been painstaking in his effort to destroy every vestige of script.

A comparison of the time the papers were burnt with the hour in which Jerry had had his first interview with the detective made it equally clear that

Traynor could have had no one watching the house while the butler was busy with the washbowl. His talk with Julia antedated the detective's engagement by at least two hours.

Peters finally arrived at what seemed the only possible explanation short of a miracle of mind-reading, which was that some chance-led individual — perhaps a tramp — had seen him talking to Julia at the window of her room, had watched him appear with a bowlful of papers that he burned, and had then encountered the detective before he reached the house; by some wild bit of good fortune Traynor might have gleaned from this individual the history of his observations.

Such an accidental wind-fall could not really be credited to the detective's mental ability, but Peters ruefully told himself that a man who had luck like that didn't need brains. At all events, whether it were luck or skill, Traynor had proved himself a most uncomfortable companion for an honest butler with a guilty secret!

"It appears to me," continued Bronson reflectively, "that he is a fairly fast worker."

Peters thought that was not too flattering a com-

pliment under the circumstances, but he merely bowed a silent agreement.

Jerry Bronson spent a cheerless morning at his office, and, at one moment, he was on the verge of making a costly mistake in regard to a big operation in which the firm was involved when he was caught and prevented by the watchful Bartlett.

"It is not to be wondered at that Sidney and the ruby are preying on your mind, Jerry," said his partner with gentle severity, "but if it's going to result in making you commit bloomers like this one, you'd better go home and let them prey there."

The unfortunate Bronson could only rub his head in shamed contrition.

"If you were a gambling man," continued the unappeased Pear — the mistake would have been a very costly one indeed — "I would offer to bet you a plugged nickel that you shied the ruby at a cat."

"Have a heart, Henry! I never use anything smaller than a shoe."

The storm-clouds gradually lifted from Bartlett's vast expanse of countenance. He felt a return of the old time confidence in his partner. "Well, well, Jerry, there's no harm done after all, so long as we

nailed it in time. By the way, I haven't had a chance yet to ask you how your detective is getting on."

Jerry brightened as he settled himself for a long conversation on the only subject that could now engage his attention. He told his partner the full history of his retaining the detective and of the steps that Traynor was taking in pursuit of his investigations.

"He sounds pretty good to me," conceded Bartlett at the end. "I say, Jerry, if he turns up this afternoon, do you mind my sitting in for awhile?"

"Mind! I had every intention of asking you, Henry."

It was exactly four o'clock when Traynor was announced by the tow-headed office boy — the red-headed one, having lasted just long enough to draw a week's salary, had then vanished after the manner of his kind. Like Bob Acre's "Valor," the office boy comes and goes.

"Show him in, and ask Mr. Bartlett to join us."

"I have some news for you," began the detective, after he had been introduced to the Pear. "Not very much, but also not uninteresting. As you can guess, it concerns Master Sidney."

"News of him already!" exclaimed Jerry.

"Surely — why not? My operative in Mainesville reported to me on the long distance 'phone less than an hour ago." Traynor brought out his note-book. "Shall I let him speak for himself?"

"Do!" begged the Pear. "I love the part of a detective story where the operative's report is given verbatim." His chair groaned dismally as he leaned back to enjoy an agreeable quarter of an hour.

Traynor was frankly amused at his enthusiasm.

"Sorry I didn't know I was going to have such a critical audience, Mr. Bartlett; I could have touched it up in spots before bringing it. . . . However, here goes: Operative T. B. H. speaking:

"'Wednesday, 5 P.M. Called up Albany Club and asked for S. D. As soon as he entered, I rang off, having ascertained his presence in club. Then took up position opposite club door and waited. S. D. appeared at six o'clock. Recognized him easily by description. Trailed him to the Churchill-Ritz, where he ordered expensive dinner — '"

"That's redundant," interjected Bartlett with some feeling. "You can't order any other kind at the Churchill-Ritz."

"'Finished dinner at 7.30. S. D. took taxi to club, picked up suit-case, and drove to Grand Central. Posted letter there but too quickly for me to note address —'"

"It was to me," broke in Jerry. "Here it is."

He handed it to the detective, who read it carefully and returned it with a shrug of his shoulders. "Nothing there," he muttered, and continued the adventures of T. B. H.

"'He boarded train for Mainesville; I followed, having previously bought ticket according to instructions. Reached destination eleven-thirty. Only one hotel in village. Secured room adjoining S. D.'s. He retired. Did not expect to see him again until morning, but a bit of luck brought us together again that night. I accosted him, according to instructions, represent —'"

"Hold on!" broke in the Pear energetically. "T. B. H. is a trifle vague there, and I don't want to miss anything. What was the bit of luck?"

"I jumped on him for that omission myself," said Traynor with a smile. "He explained that he had not wished to incriminate himself on the 'phone, but he managed to let me understand that

both he and S. D. had descended from their rooms to ask the Landlord if he had anything antedating the Eighteenth Amendment, and consequently met each other once more."

"Of course," murmured the Pear apologetically. "Most natural thing in the world — I should have thought of that myself! Go on, Sherlock Holmes! I'm afraid I'm no detective!"

"'— accosted him according to instructions, representing myself as a traveling salesman in jewelry —'"

"My golly!" Bronson's anxiety did not prevent him from shooting a glance of admiration at Traynor. "However did you think of that?"

"Stop interrupting, Jerry — I hate serial stories."

"'— jewelry. He was stand-offish at first but gradually became less so —'"

"After about the third," whispered the Pear dreamily.

"'Had no difficulty in steering our conversation to rubies, and hinted that my firm did not always acquire its best stones in the open market.'"

"T. B. H. is a very shrewd fellow," said Traynor, interrupting himself at this point. "You might

think he was going ahead rather too fast just there, but I've no doubt he pretended to be under the influence of liquor." He turned back to his notebook.

"'S. D. did not seem interested, so I left him to think over what I had said. Did not see him next morning to speak to. He was off on his insurance business. Sat next to him at lunch. A telegram was brought to him, which I managed to read over his shoulder. It was dated this morning, from Station F3 New York, and said "Check deposited." It was not signed. He seemed pleased. After lunch he wrote a long letter which he sealed and posted immediately so that I was unable to see the address. I made out a few letters of addressee's name. They were, M-a-y . . . M-i-n-n . . . Followed him to insurance agency, then went to railroad station and telephoned office.'"

"Is that all?" asked Bronson disappointedly.

"I think it's a good deal, Jerry," corrected his partner. "I say, Traynor, if he didn't see that envelope, how did he get those letters?"

"The blotter, of course," explained the detective patiently. "As it was presumably a hotel blotter I think he did well to find anything at all."

"May — Minn — " repeated Bartlett. "Well, I can detect *that!* Why do you suppose he's writing to her?"

"I have a pretty good idea," responded Traynor slowly, "but I don't think I'll advance it just yet." He ruffled the pages of his notebook, then slipped it in his pocket and turned to Bartlett with a smile. "Over-indulgence in sweets is bad! I could read you the report of another operative but it will save time if I tell it to you in my own words."

"Where was he planted?" asked the Pear eagerly.

"At the Albany Club, trying to get a line on Sidney's movements yesterday. Unfortunately he didn't get much, though he was lucky enough to find a club waiter who wasn't averse to gossiping about the members. My man represented himself as a taxi-driver who had brought Mr. Durant to the Club a few nights before" — Traynor glanced apologetically at Jerry — "somewhat the worse for wear. The waiter took the bait, and before he had finished talking my man had learned that Sidney had arrived at the club very early yesterday morning, had had breakfast and a nap, and had then vanished for the rest of the day. He came back just before five,

apparently more cheerful than he had been for weeks. The waiter had no notion of where he had been during the day.

"So that is the extent of the information I have gathered about Sidney and his recent movements." He frowned. "I'm not very well satisfied with this second man's report. He should have learned more in the twenty-four hours that he's had."

"Oh, I don't know," said Bartlett. "When you stop to think of all the things he might have done . . . He could have taken the subway to the Bronx, he might have taken the elevated to Coney Island, or the Tube to Hoboken. How can you trace a man under such conditions?"

"It would be difficult," admitted the detective, "if I didn't have some idea of where to look for him. As it is, I expect to know shortly just what he did with himself from the time he left the Universal office in the morning until five o'clock, when he showed up at the club looking cheerful. I also expect to find out the cause of his happiness.

That ended the interview, and Traynor took his leave.

In spite of his hopeful predictions, two days

passed and the detective still had no clue to where Sidney had spent the afternoon in question, nor did the daily bulletins from T. B. H. contain anything very startling. Sidney was apparently very busy with his agency problem; he appeared only casually interested in the evenings when the fake salesman turned the talk to jewelry.

On the other hand, there was food for thought in the fact that he received a letter on the third morning addressed in a bold, dashing hand.

"That's Maybelle!" said the Pear with profound conviction. "For boldness and dash you can't beat her handwriting — or the girl either!"

It was T. B. H.'s settled belief that Sidney carried the letter on his person, from which his expectant audience in New York gathered that Mr. Durant's room at the Mainesville Arms had been subjected to a search of scientific thoroughness.

By this time an air of solemn gloom had descended upon the house at Claredale. Mrs. Bronson twice gave way to hysterical tears, and the butler, learning of this, wondered whether it was the theft that upset her or whether the disappearance of the ruby had provided her with an excellent excuse to relieve

her feelings, surcharged from quite different causes.

Peters did not try to answer this question, but preferred rather to put the whole matter out of his mind and await events with what patience he could. He was unable to forget that it was he who was primarily responsible for bringing this reign of sorrow and suspicion into a previously happy family, and he continually reproached himself for ever having mentioned the ill-fated ruby.

One morning Mrs. Bronson received an invitation from a sister to spend a week-end at Rye, and, after some hesitation, she decided to accept it.

Jerry Bronson welcomed her decision because he thought it would do her good to have a change from the growing oppressiveness of the atmosphere in her own home. Joan was pleased for reasons of her own, but gladdest of all was the butler, because it removed from his view a sorely troubled woman whose presence was a perpetual reminder of a trembling figure that had leaned against the library door, one white hand at its throat and the other, clenched, hanging by its side.

Chapter Fifteen

EXIT THE MINNEDINKER

LIFE is full of little coincidences. Henry Bartlett had not thought of the Churchill-Ritz for months until he heard it mentioned in the detective's report from T. B. H., yet it was only a few days later that he accepted an invitation to dine with a friend, and the friend promptly selected the famous restaurant as being the only one in town really adequate to their needs, and appointed its gilded reception room as the rendezvous at seven-thirty.

Bartlett was a little early, but he didn't mind that. It was always amusing to sit on a comfortable sofa against the wall and put in a quarter of an hour reviewing the most fashionable crowd in New York. The women, usually beautiful and always well-dressed, stood out brilliantly against the darker background of their male escorts in the conventional black, forming a picture that could only be equaled at the Opera or the Horse Show.

For nearly ten minutes Bartlett, looking more pear-like than ever against the pink-satined back of his sofa, was perfectly contented in mind and body. This is a condition of well-being that not infrequently tempts the Fates to disagreeable intervention, and they attended to Bartlett's case almost immediately.

His attention was idly drawn to a party of four, two men and two women, who had just entered the room, and it was with a sharp feeling of discomfort that he suddenly recognized the tall, golden-haired young lady who led them on their way with a cool air of assurance that Bartlett was quick to remember. He shrank in upon himself, trying hard to appear small and insignificant, and succeeding not at all. His heart gave a thump of dismay as he realized that she had not only seen him but was approaching him with the evident intention of speaking. She halted before him, the rest of her party waiting patiently in the offing, and he rose to greet her, looking very unhappy. There was nothing, he believed, that he cared to say to her.

"Don't be frightened!" she laughed at him. "I haven't a thing to squeak at you!"

He was relieved to find her in such good-humor.

"You're dining here, Miss Minnedinker?"

"Cut the Minnedinker," she adjured him. "It's Montmorency on Broadway — my mother's name," she added, from sheer force of habit. "I have just come over to apologize for the other afternoon; I'm afraid I was a little irritable."

"Surely not," murmured the Pear in honeyed accents. "I noticed nothing of the kind."

She gurgled at him. "You know, you're rather nice when you are not being asked for money! Why did you feel obliged to be so harsh with a poor girl that afternoon when you knew all the time he was going to pay up?"

"Pay up!" He stared at her. "Who pay up what?"

"Why, old Bronsie, I suppose!" She seemed no less surprised than he. "Of course it was from him that Sidney got the cash to settle that note?"

"Has — has Sidney done that?"

"He has." She regarded him thoughtfully. "Where did he get the money if not from Unkie Jerry?"

"I — I — No doubt you're right." Bartlett, re-

covering, grew a little cautious. "It is quite possible that Mr. Bronson may have decided to help him and not have mentioned the matter to me."

"Very likely! A man of Mr. Bronson's firmness and resolution — those were your words, weren't they? — might not care to confess his momentary weakness to you!" She smiled at him sweetly. "Well, I can't keep my people waiting any longer. Bye-bye, old dear!" She swept gracefully away.

So Sidney had paid up!

The news gave Bartlett plenty of food for serious reflection that evening, and in the morning, when he sadly related it to his partner, he was not surprised to see Jerry wince as if he had been struck.

"I expect I'd better tell Traynor about this at once," he said after an interval. "He has never said outright that he thinks it was Sidney who took the ruby, but I'm afraid this bit of information will strike him as more or less conclusive."

"It has a nasty look," admitted Bartlett. "But just to be contrary, Jerry, I'm going to believe in Sidney's innocence until he comes out in so many words and tells me he's a thief. I suppose it's useless to remind you again that we still have to hear

his own story? You are wrong to condemn him unheard."

"*I'm* not condemning him, Henry," remonstrated Bronson as he rose and took up his hat. "It is the circumstances, and his own inexplicable actions, that are piling up the evidence against him."

"Inexplicable is a peach of a word, Jerry, and deserves to be used more cautiously. You're off to see Traynor now? Well, let's hope he will view this latest development in a different light than you. At all events he won't jump quite so rapidly to conclusions."

The detective, however, came nearer to realizing Bronson's fears than Bartlett's hopes. His keen young face was very grave as Jerry finished his description of his partner's chance encounter with the fair Maybelle.

"This is exactly what I expected. You remember our operative in Mainesville reported that Sidney had received a telegram reading 'check deposited'? His first action after that was to sit down and write to the woman who held his note, and I felt then that the letter probably contained a check of his own in settlement of the debt."

"I feared as much myself," confessed Jerry sadly. "Then you — you think he took it?"

"Much as I'd like to spare your feelings, Mr. Bronson, I must admit that I do. It would be stupid and cruel of me to encourage you with false hopes that would only add disappointment to your sorrow when they proved empty. The sole consolation I can offer you is that we have absolutely no definite proof that Sidney is guilty — and I don't think we ever will have. I say that because the only way we could bring the crime home to him would be by arresting him and — "

"No, no! Anything but that! I may quarrel with him; I may order him out of my house; but I will not publicly brand him as a thief just at the outstart of his business career. My sister's son. . . . "

"There you are! " The detective's tone betrayed his annoyance, for which his next words accounted. "Not a very satisfactory ending to the case from my point of view, but I am bound by your instructions."

"I know," answered Jerry huskily. "I'm sorry. I suppose I am a very weak man — "

"You're a very kind man," broke in Traynor

quickly. "I must beg your pardon for dragging in my selfish regrets at such a moment."

"Am I to understand that you consider the case closed?"

"That is for you to determine, Mr. Bronson. Even if we are pretty sure of the — er — light-fingered artist, there still remains the task of recovering McKittrick's ruby. Surely you haven't forgotten that?"

Jerry roused himself with an effort.

"I almost had," he muttered, "and even now I can't see how —"

"Wait! Before you give up the idea as hopeless, let me run over the main facts of the case as I see them and then we can better decide how good a chance we have of recovering the jewel.

"In the first place, we have accepted Peters' declaration that he found all the doors and windows properly fastened on the morning after the theft — and certainly he appears to be convincingly positive about that — and we have consequently assumed that someone in the house is the guilty person.

"We have practically eliminated everyone except Sidney, partly because we have nothing against the

others, and partly because so many pieces of circumstantial evidence point to that young man as being the thief.

"As I see it, he entered the library that evening on a legitimate errand, and must have been fairly staggered for an instant when he saw the ruby lying before him and realized that it offered him a chance to get the money he needed so desperately. He weighed the possible consequences of being caught, and I'm very much afraid that he may have counted on the generosity that you are now showing; he could imagine your being firm in the matter of Maybelle even to the point of letting her secure a judgment against him, but he *knew* that your kind heart would never allow him to be arrested and disgraced even if he were caught red-handed.

"He took the ruby, drove to the club for the doctor, and returned with him to the house. An amateur in crime, we can guess at his nervous anxiety while he hung around waiting for the doctor to conclude his examination, fearful that the loss of the ruby might be noticed at any moment while he was right there with the spoils in his pocket — unless, indeed, he had sense enough to bunk it some-

where by the roadside after leaving the house the first time.

" Anyway, he took the doctor home, and then his nerve failed him temporarily. He could not summon sufficient courage to face you that night, for he must have supposed that the ruby had been missed by then, so he drove to the station in time to catch the midnight train for New York. A more practiced crook would have gone back to face the music, but Sidney's first instinct was flight.

" The trip to Mainesville must have suited his end admirably, for it gave him an opportunity to steady his nerve before returning home, *and* time to concoct a story to clear himself of suspicion. Mark my words, Mr. Bronson, he will come back from the country with some very plausible tale to account for his ability to pay Maybelle! "

" I regret to say we have been unable to find out where he spent the afternoon of the day following the theft, but we do know that he returned to his club about five o'clock in a noticeably cheerful mood. That points to his having satisfactorily disposed of the ruby — "

" Could he have done it so quickly? "

"My dear sir, it needn't have taken him ten minutes if he knew where to go! I expect he did, and I have been using my best endeavors to find out where it was. Cautious inquiries have been made at all pawn-shops, and of a few wholesale jewelers who are notably not too fastidious about the antecedents of the stones they buy, but all these routine efforts have drawn blanks. In addition, I have hunted up as many of Sidney's cronies as I could find and have had them shadowed, hoping to pick up from their movements some hint that would put us on the trail of the fence, but nothing of the kind materialized."

"But — but isn't that a point in the boy's favor?"

"A pretty fine one, I'm afraid. We must concede that Sidney is no fool, and we may conclude that he perfected his arrangements to dispose of the ruby before he risked stealing it."

"*What!*" Jerry straightened in his chair and gazed at the detective with a face the color of old ivory. "Are you suggesting that he had *planned* the theft? How can you possibly take that for granted unless you have evidence to prove it?"

"We have just that, Mr. Bronson."

Jerry, stricken speechless, stared at the speaker. His lips moved but no words issued from them; he gripped the arms of his chair to stay the trembling of his hands. Traynor, with a gloomy expression, drew his notebook from his pocket and slowly turned its leaves until he came to the entry that he sought. He glanced over it a moment and then raised his eyes from the page to Bronson in mute inquiry.

"Go on. Go . . . on."

"Two days before the ruby was stolen," said Traynor quietly, "Miss Ayres and Sidney had a conversation in the library — you will recall the occasion when I tell you that it followed immediately upon the interview in which you refused to help him meet Maybelle's note. He was considerably upset and in a mood to talk freely of his troubles to the first comer, so he told Miss Ayres something of the situation in which he was placed. She generously offered to help him, not knowing how large a sum was involved, but he waved aside her proposal as futile and went on to say — I have what purports to be his exact words here — 'I've as much chance of raising twenty-five million as twenty-five hun-

dred, unless I take a can-opener and bust into that tin safe. I expect Uncle Jerry's rubies would melt down to what I need." Traynor shut his book and replaced it in his pocket. "You will say truly that a reckless speech of that sort is no proof that he took the ruby, but it *is* proof that the idea had occurred to him at least forty-eight hours before the lucky opportunity presented itself. I'm inclined to think that he utilized some of those hours in discovering a safe way to dispose of anything he might get his hands on —"

"Please!" Jerry threw out an imploring hand. "You have told me all I can bear to hear. . . ."

The detective looked sympathetically at the stricken figure before him, then rose and left the room for a minute or two. He came back with a tumbler full of brownish liquid that he held out to Bronson.

"Won't you drink this, sir? It's some excellent Bourbon, and you will feel the better for it. It's a pity the law doesn't allow detectives to prescribe it, as well as doctors! We have to give our clients some nasty jolts at times."

Bronson automatically took the whisky and swal-

lowed it at a gulp. It brought tears to his eyes, but it also lent fresh strength to body and spirit. In a few moments he was able to control his voice to the point of speech.

"We were speaking of the chances of recovering the ruby. What is your idea, Mr. Traynor?"

"To advertise. The usual formula: liberal reward and no questions."

"Oh! And you think that may bring results?"

"It will depend somewhat upon the reward. The thief, whoever he may be, has played his cards cleverly, and we will only be doing him justice if we assume that he has taken the ruby to some fence who is at the top of his profession. Such a man is not apt to be in need of ready money; he can afford to keep the stone until it is comparatively safe to dispose of it, and he will naturally not look at a reward unless it is a considerable sum."

"Why should he look at it at all? Wouldn't he be certain to get more money by waiting and selling the ruby?"

"You forget the element of danger that would still exist no matter how careful he might be; such gentry are willing enough to play safe if they can

get a substantial reward — and no questions asked."

"I will offer a reward of twenty-five hundred dollars," said Jerry, who could make up his mind very quickly when required.

For once Traynor permitted an exclamation of surprise to pass his lips.

"That is certainly a generous offer!"

"Well, if your assumptions are correct the reward has need to be large. Also, I can give up that amount with equanimity since I would have been out that sum anyway over this wretched business."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Maybelle's note, of course. I had determined to pay that in the end, so if I recover the ruby for that sum I am out only what I expected to be."

Traynor smiled, and regarded Bronson with some admiration.

"That is at once a philosophical and very sporting way to look at it! Well — if you wish me to insert an advertisement along those lines I feel fairly confident that such a big bait will hook a very big fish."

"I devoutly trust so," sighed Jerry, and rose to his feet. "You see, all that is left to me now is

to square myself with McKittrick. He, after all, is the real loser in this whole wretched affair. I have been forgetting him in the thought of my own troubles, but my conscience would never give me any peace if I didn't use my utmost efforts to get back his ruby."

"You might reimburse him."

"Not the same thing at all. Neither monetary compensation nor the gift of my own ruby, so exactly like his, would be as satisfactory as returning his own property which was lost through my confounded carelessness."

"I see." Traynor accompanied the broker to the door of the outer office where he again voiced his regret at such an anti-climactic end to his work. "I can quite understand your attitude toward your nephew, Mr. Bronson, but it doesn't make for a clean-cut case."

"That is my fault, Traynor." Jerry held out his hand. "You must sacrifice your professional pride this time to the sentimental whim of an old man."

Back again in his office, he recounted the details of his talk with the detective to Bartlett. It shook him considerably to state the case in its bald con-

ditions. The Pear listened attentively, shook his head mournfully a number of times, and, by way of consolation, lit a cigar that exceeded his daily limit.

"'Here's a how-de-do, here's a pretty mess!'" he quoted dolefully. "Sidney is found guilty without a trial; if you get the ruby back it will cost you twenty-five hundred; and in my opinion you'll never find the real thief! No wonder people prefer detectives in fiction to the lunatics in real life."

Jerry Bronson massaged his scalp sadly.

Nobody who watched him alight from the train that afternoon at Claredale would have recognized in him the dapper gentleman who had carried himself so jauntily on that same platform less than two weeks ago. His air was one of utter dejection, his appearance that of a thoroughly disheartened man.

It seemed to him only in keeping with the misfortune that dogged him these days that there was no blue car, no affectionate greeting from Joan, to welcome him. Ordinarily in these circumstances he walked briskly home; to-day he trudged heavily.

Yet there was held in reserve for him one pleasant surprise to brighten this day of gloom. Peters

opened the door as usual, but Jerry's eyes went to the slender figure that stood behind him and that hurried forward as soon as his identity was manifest.

"Mary!" he cried, as she came into his arms. "I didn't expect you for days yet!"

"Oh — I couldn't stay away from you any longer!" she laughed.

He held her off and regarded her quizzically. "I'm sure I don't see what else could have brought you back! The change has evidently done you a world of good. You look like a new person!"

"Oh, Jerry!" she cried, and her clasp tightened on his arm. "I'm the happiest woman alive, I do believe!"

Behind them, unnoticed, the butler started slightly.

Chapter Sixteen

NEWS OF THE RUBY

THE following morning Jerry opened his *Herald* at the breakfast table with more eagerness than he had shown in that daily custom for some time, but he passed by the news and editorial pages and turned his whole attention to the "Lost and Found" column.

He had left the phrasing of the advertisement to Traynor, and he noted with pleasure that the detective had drawn up a notice that was at once clear and discreet. There was nothing to suggest that the ruby had been stolen, nor any hint that it was from Claredale that it had disappeared, but the description of the jewel and the date of its loss would identify it beyond all doubt if the offer of the reward was read by the man they wanted to have read it. As Traynor had remarked, rubies of that size and value were not "lost" every day, and even if some dealer had bought the stone in good faith he would

see from the advertisement that there was something dubious about the antecedents of his purchase. What such a man might do thereafter depended very largely on the quality of his honesty. . . .

That morning ushered in a red-letter day in the life of Joan Ayres. Jerry Bronson had just laid aside his paper when he heard her give a startled exclamation, and he looked up to see her staring with puckered brows at a typewritten letter that had fluttered from her relaxed fingers on to the table before her.

"What is it, Joan? Not bad news, I hope."

"It's from England," answered the girl slowly, and a little sadly. "From a firm of lawyers in Wicklecombe, to tell me that Uncle Teddy is dead."

"Uncle Teddy?" repeated Jerry somewhat vaguely. He had never kept very close track of her English relatives. "Who was Uncle Teddy?"

"My mother's eldest brother. Of course I haven't seen him for a million years, but I can remember how good he was to me when I was a child — and to everyone else for that matter. Uncle Teddy had a life habit of being good to others."

He murmured a few words of condolence.

"Apparently Uncle Teddy has left everything to me," continued Joan glancing again at the letter. "That is really why these lawyers have written. They want me to come over, if possible, and help settle the estate."

Jerry straightened in his chair.

"Oh, *do* they!" he cried with some asperity. "Well, unless the estate is something very handsome and complicated, I shall certainly not let you go!"

"Dear Cousin Jerry!" She smiled at him wistfully, and the lovely blue eyes were moist. "No, it's not a large fortune. Only a small cottage and a small garden — both old-fashioned and delightful, as I remember them — and the income from some securities that amounts to a few hundred a year."

"Oh, is that all!" He pretended vast relief. "Well then, tell your lawyer people to put the whole thing in an envelope and mail it to you!" Moved to a rare display of emotion, he leaned towards her and covered her hand with his own. "I can't let any of the sunshine go out of my life just when so many shadows seem to be falling upon it!"

"Dear Cousin Jerry!" she repeated still more softly. "You've been so good to me always — and

now this tiresome money comes along and makes me independent!"

"Joan!" he stared at her aghast. "What are you suggesting? Can't you stay here and enjoy your independence like a sensible person? Do you have to rush off as far as — as the moon, to celebrate it? After all your Cousin Mary and I have done to make you happy, do you think this is the way to reward us?"

"Oh!" Joan wasn't proof against this attack, and she gave an audible, warning sniff. "But, don't you see, you two dears have already done enough for a homeless stray or-orphan. I c-can't let you go on d-doing more!"

"Idiot!"

"I'm n-not an idiot!" The girl dried her eyes and managed to swallow the greater part of her distress in one emotional gulp. "Besides, Cousin Jerry, I haven't told you everything. Last year I had a long letter from Uncle Teddy in which he said he was going to leave me the old place — it's been in the family for *centuries!* — and asked me to live in it and keep it up. Naturally, I said I would, but I never dreamed he would d-die so soon!"

"You can never tell," said Jerry darkly. "Take me, for instance; I appear to be perfectly healthy, but I have reached an advanced age — a *very* advanced age, Joan! — and I may shuffle off at any time. Under the distressing possibility of that, I do not see how you can reconcile the idea of leaving me — "

"Oh — *stop!* "

Peters had missed the greater part of this conversation, and as he entered at this moment with a fresh supply of coffee he was surprised to see that Joan was apparently divided between laughter and tears. Her next words however gave him the clue to much that had passed.

"Cousin Jerry, I am immeasurably shocked by this revelation of your internal decay, but it only strengthens my resolve." She looked again at the disturbing communication from England. "Perhaps if I ask you very prettily you will let me come back to be with you at the end, but, in the meantime, it does seem to me that I ought to do what these lawyers ask — and that is, to go to England as soon as possible and — "

"*Confound* you, Peters! "

"Oh — *sir!*" cried the butler in an agony of contrition.

The coffee pot had slipped in his hand as he was pouring Jerry's second cup, and a stream of coffee that Mrs. O'Malley prided herself on keeping at the boiling point was diverted from its proper destination and precipitated upon Jerry's knee. He sprang to his feet, hopping with pain, while the butler hopped after and around him with soothing pats of a napkin.

The incident effectually ended any further discussion of Joan's plans, for that heartless young woman, having ascertained that "dear Cousin Jerry" was more startled than hurt, laughed at his plight until he went off sulkily to change his trousers.

Peters kept discreetly out of sight until Jerry had left the house, spending the time in the pantry while he struggled with a number of conflicting emotions. Now, he was filled with shame at the recollection of his clumsiness; then, doubled up helplessly with laughter as he remembered how he and the unfortunate broker had pirouetted about the dining-room; finally, sobered and a little

dismayed at the thought of how empty the house would seem after cheery Joan's departure. . . .

At ten o'clock, the postman's whistle, heralding the second mail delivery, recalled the butler to the serious performance of his duties. He went to the front door and received a circular, a local bill, and an appeal for charity, all of which he placed neatly on a tray and bore off to Mrs. Bronson.

He found her in her sitting-room on the second floor, seated at her desk. After he had knocked, he remained standing in the doorway waiting for her to acknowledge his presence, but she did not choose to do so until she completed the short task upon which she was engaged at the moment. She had evidently just written a check, and now she tore it from her book and slipped it into an envelope, which she sealed but did not address. He noted idly that, as she pounded upon the flap to insure its sticking, she did so with a suggestion of intense satisfaction, as of pleasure at a duty done at last. Then she turned and beckoned to the butler.

"Thank you, Peters. . . . Do you know where Miss Joan is?"

"On the veranda, ma'am."

"Please ask her if she will come here."

The butler departed on this new errand, but he paused as he reached the front door. He stood for a long minute staring at Joan, who was seated at the farther end of the veranda, and was perfectly unconscious that she was being watched. She was leaning back in her chair, her hands folded in her lap, and her fingers clutching the crumpled letter from England; her blue eyes gazed unseeing into space, her lovely face appeared troubled, almost tired, but the butler thought she had never looked more beautiful than at this moment when the joy of going home fought with the pain of leaving her friends.

He advanced with his message.

"Thank you, Peters."

She rose at once, and he stood aside and bowed slightly as she passed; but his eyes were not on the ground, where he knew very well they should have been, and they remained fixed on the empty doorway long after she had vanished through it into the house. . . .

He saw her again an hour later when he answered the library bell and found it was Joan who had rung.

She was just hanging up the receiver of the telephone, and he noted subconsciously that she had changed her dress and had put on a hat; but what really caught his eye the moment he entered was the unstamped envelope that lay beside her parasol on the desk, its superscription written in Mrs. Bronson's heavy, legible script. The address fairly yelled at him from across the room, and though the shock was a disagreeable one, yet he knew that he had been expecting just some such thing. He could admit now that he had had a premonition of the ugly truth when he saw her slipping a check into that same envelope. . . .

Joan picked up the parasol and the letter, and her pleasant voice, with its faint English accent, broke in upon his thoughts.

" Peters, I'm going over to the Lathams', and they have asked me to stay to lunch. Will you tell Mrs. Bronson, please? "

He bowed silently and withdrew. Alone in the pantry, he lit a cigarette and mused irritably on the persistent way in which chance continued to feed the fire of his suspicions. He was everlastingly picking up odd scraps of information that tended

always to convince him of Mrs. Bronson's guilt — and he was steadily growing more and more loth to believe such a thing of Jerry Bronson's attractive young wife.

But his reluctance to entertain the possibility could not efface from consideration the fact that the night before she had declared herself the happiest of women, and that this morning she had sent off a check in settlement of a very troublesome debt.

Where had she obtained that money?

The advertisement, with its tempting offer of twenty-five hundred dollars and no questions asked, ran for two mornings without any answer, but, shortly after one o'clock on the third day, Jerry Bronson, seated in his office, received a message that gave him a sharp thrill of expectancy. It was Traynor's voice that came to him over the telephone.

"Can you come around?" asked the detective. "The morning mail has brought a nibble at our bait. Unfortunately I did not reach the office until a few minutes ago, and, more unfortunately still, I am detained here now, or I would call on you and give you a bit of information —"

"I'll come immediately!" cried Jerry, interrupting his apologies.

He hung up the receiver, seized his hat and cane, and prepared to be as good as his word. Then it occurred to him that there was a bit of real-estate in the Bronx at which he had long wanted to look, so he left a message with the office-boy for Bartlett to the effect that he would not return to the office that afternoon. From such small acorns do big oaks grow — !

He was rather cheered by the news from Traynor, because of late he had suffered conscientious prickings on the score of his responsibility to McKittrick. He was glad to hear that there had been a response to the advertisement. Twenty-five hundred dollars was a stiff figure, but after all he could afford it, and it was not too high a price to pay for the luxury of leaving a five-thousand dollar ruby kicking around his desk where the first crook could grab it.

Whether or not Sidney were guilty — and Jerry felt there was very little doubt left on that score — he could not exonerate himself from his initial stupidity nor from the necessity of retrieving himself in the opinion of McKittrick. He still felt remark-

ably uncomfortable when he thought of that gentleman's telegraphed characterization of Peters, who after all had only been trying to serve his interests. . . .

"I'm delighted to think there's a chance of recovering the ruby," he told Traynor, shaking hands warmly.

"I suppose it's something," admitted the detective unwillingly, "though the idea of bargaining with a crook goes a bit against the grain. If we could nab our man —"

"Please!" protested Jerry. "I'm afraid we're agreed on who our man is, and — well, it may seem ridiculous, but if — if he is guilty, I'd just as soon not have it proved."

The detective shrugged his shoulders, but at the same time he nodded understandingly. He opened a drawer in his desk and drew out a sheet of letter-paper.

"Here's the answer I received this morning. It appears to be a typical communication from a typical criminal."

"deer sir," read Jerry, "if you want yure ruby meet me Saterday morning at ten o'clock at 213

Mulberry street. the word is 'ruby.' Bring the cash and dont try no games or the deal is off."

There was no signature. Jerry read it twice, and handed it back to Traynor.

"Not a very literate person," he said.

"I'm not so sure," commented Traynor. He tapped the missive thoughtfully with his fingers as he glanced over it. "The illiteracy is perhaps feigned — and not very artistically. He has been careful to misspell a few words and to ignore capitals and punctuation — but a really illiterate person would hardly have put that apostrophe in 'o'clock,' would he? No, Mr. Bronson, I'm inclined to think that Mr. Fence is a shrewd fellow, as we assumed at first."

"There's one thing I don't like about it," said Jerry meditatively. "He hasn't named a very choice neighborhood for the rendezvous. Suppose this is only a hoax to get you or me there with twenty-five hundred in cash?"

A smile came and went on the detective's face. "I take these risks on an average of once a month," he answered lightly. "It's part of my business. As for the neighborhood, I daresay our friend has

been clever enough to choose a place from which he can escape if we — er — try to trap him."

"Trap him?"

"Well," replied the detective, looking away, "it might be possible to surround his house, or the whole block if necessary, with a cordon of plain-clothes police. They'd almost surely land him. . . ."

Jerry Bronson contemplated this prospect for an instant, and when he replied his whole character was epitomized in his decision.

"Crook or no crook, Mr. Traynor," he said firmly, "we have, in our advertisement, tacitly promised this man safe conduct. I do not think we should take advantage of his trust in our good faith."

"Right!" The young detective flushed a little at the implied rebuke, but his answer was cordial, and the glance that he shot at his employer was not devoid of admiration. "I knew you'd feel that way, Mr. Bronson. But you see, if there is one thing my profession has taught me, it is to despise and condemn, more than I do the thief, the receiver of stolen goods."

Jerry did not choose to debate the question further. He had picked up the letter they were con-

sidering and was regarding it frowningly. "By the way, the appointment is for to-morrow morning — and calls for cash. I suppose it *must* be cash?"

The detective merely looked amused at the question. Jerry glanced at his watch and grew slightly embarrassed.

"The fact is, Mr. Traynor — you see, it's Friday, and it's going to be rather difficult for me to get that amount in currency between now and to-morrow morning at ten. I don't keep a very big balance at the bank and I shall have to sell some securities to get this money. It is already rather late in the day to get them — they're in my safe-deposit box — sell them, and get the money before the close of banking hours. Couldn't you insert another notice postponing the meeting for twenty-four hours?"

Traynor thought a moment, then shook his head decisively.

"That wouldn't be wise. Nothing we could do would be more calculated to arouse suspicion in the mind of a crook. These fellows are scary birds, Mr. Bronson, and he would see in such an advertisement only a clumsy attempt on our part to gain

time to investigate 213 Mulberry Street and make our arrangements to catch him in a net of policemen."

"No doubt you are right. Well, I suppose I can go to my bank and borrow the money on my note—"

"One moment!" Traynor rose and went to the big safe, which he opened, and consulted a bank-book. "Yes, as I thought, the firm has a very fair balance just at present. I'll get the money myself in time to meet Mr. Crook. That will save you some trouble, and," he added almost shamefacedly, "I have done so little for you on this case that it will be a real pleasure to me to help you in this minor detail."

Bronson grew still more embarrassed.

"It's really very good of you—" he began.

"Not at all!" The detective raised a protesting hand. "On the contrary, I will consider that you are doing me a favor in letting me be of some use. Now, let me see; you don't usually come to town on Saturdays during the summer, do you?"

"N-no. Why?"

"I was thinking that I might save you the neces-

sity of doing so to-morrow. If I get the ruby in the morning, which I hope with all my heart will be the case, I'll be delighted to bring it out to you at Claredale. Then you can give me your check, dated as far ahead as your convenience may dictate, and I will have — at least — the artistic satisfaction of handing you the ruby in the same room from which it disappeared."

Jerry Bronson braced himself to meet the other's mood.

"It's awfully good of you, Traynor!" he cried gratefully again. "As for your method of returning the ruby, I think it is excellent! I shall have the whole household there to witness the ceremony, and after that you must stay to lunch and see if Mrs. O'Malley's cooking lives up to your first sample of it."

"Ah!" said the detective heartily. "There is something to which I shall look forward indeed!"

Chapter Seventeen

A CLUE TO THE THIEF

WHILE Jerry Bronson was talking to the detective, Peters, it being his day off, was in the train speeding from Claredale to New York, and heartily glad to have a little time to himself.

If he had a sick mother in the city, as he had informed Mr. Jackson, she was doomed to suffer from filial neglect on this afternoon. Peters went straight to a small but attractive-looking apartment house in the East Forties, nodded a greeting to the elevator-boy, who welcomed him with a grin, and ascended to the third floor. Here he drew a latch-key from his pocket, and proceeded to open the door of one of the four apartments on that story, and although the key did not work as smoothly as usual, causing him a moment's impatience, he was soon inside the flat.

The rooms were stale and stuffy from disuse, and his first care was to make a tour of the apartment

and open every one of the windows; then he returned to the front room, which was arranged as a very comfortable bachelor sitting-room, and proceeded to make himself entirely at home. He pulled up McKittrick's favorite chair to a spot where it would receive some benefit from the faint current of air that came through the window, took an excellent cigar which he chose with great care from McKittrick's best box, and settled himself to puzzle his wits over a number of things.

He wondered, first of all, what Jerry Bronson might think of him. It was all very well for him to realize his own innocence, but he could not lose sight of the fact that his virtue might not be so obvious to the eyes of others. He was quite aware that his action in taking the ruby to Claredale was, on the surface, distinctly irregular, and, as Traynor had suggested to Mrs. Bronson, he was intelligent enough to realize that he might be suspected of an elaborate scheme to possess himself of the ruby at the expense of the unfortunate Jerry. It caused him amazement at times to think that the finger of suspicion had never been directly pointed at him, but not one of the family, by word or glance, had ever suggested

the possibility of his being the thief, but had rather made it plain, if anything, that they considered him, equally with Jerry, as a subject for sympathy. This magnanimity hardly tended to comfort the man who had innocently brought all this trouble on a once-peaceful family. . . .

What a mess it all was! Peters had never before experienced the effect that a theft can have upon people who hitherto regarded one another with esteem and respect, and he never wanted to again. Here was he suspecting the mistress of the house, a woman whom he would ordinarily have liked well enough even if he considered her a bit too selfish and a bit too pushing socially. And Jerry Bronson was obviously hurting himself more than anyone else by suspecting that young scapegrace, Sidney. Peters was inclined to wonder at the tenacity with which Jerry clung to his theory, for the broker had never told him in detail all the scraps of evidence that pointed to his nephew as the thief. The butler only knew what he had gathered in a general way — that the boy was, in a general way, given to sporting adventures, and was in pressing need of a large sum of money as the result of some escapade; he was

not aware of the existence of Maybelle, much less that Sidney had discharged his indebtedness.

As for Mrs. Bronson — whom *she* might suspect, provided she were innocent herself, he did not have the least idea. No intuition came to tell him that she had mentioned his own name to Traynor!

Then there was Julia. Peters had frequently asked himself if he had not allowed a misguided sentiment to run away with common prudence in so summarily concluding that she had had no part in the affair. He could not help wondering if the girl had simply been clever enough to guess his good-nature and impose upon it. Suppose she were even now laughing to herself at his credulity? Suppose as a result of his well-intentioned but misguided kindness Jerry Bronson were to awaken some morning to find all his own rubies vanished overnight? How would he, Peters, feel then?

The thought was so disagreeable that he did his best to put it on one side, but it cropped up again almost directly as a corollary to still another puzzle, which was why had Traynor never referred again to the burning of Julia's papers, of whose destruction the detective had so luckily learned? To Peters,

the man's silence was apparently inexplicable. He could only account for it by assuming that Traynor might be following some other lead of his own — in which case he might be so sure of himself as to disregard any other incidents that he had encountered in the course of his investigation. . . .

Peters lit another cigar and wished for the hundredth time that he had never taken that confounded ruby to Claredale. He would have wished that he had never gone there himself, except — ! The thought of Joan Ayres passed through his mind and dissipated his troubled musings, just as the fresh outer air, when he opened the windows, had swept through the apartment and refreshed its vitiated atmosphere. And soon she would be leaving — in fact, had already made application for her passport.

But the butler had one or two matters to attend to in the city, and, when he had finished his second cigar, he rose and took his hat from the chair from which he had tossed it. He spent a few minutes in removing all traces of his presence, shut the windows again, and then left the apartment. He shut the door behind him as he stepped into the hall, but, as the building was an old one and the management

had never troubled to install automatic locks, he was obliged to produce his key again and turn it in the door. Once again the lock proved refractory, and Peters gave an exclamation of annoyance.

"Dash the thing!" he muttered. "I suppose this means a job for the locksmith —"

Locksmith! The word, passing through his brain, seemed to light a mental torch that flared up suddenly and appeared to illumine everything! Anyone passing through the hall in the next few minutes must have been astonished by the sight of a quietly dressed young man leaning against the wall and holding both hands to his head as though fearful that it would burst.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he said aloud, after nearly a minute had passed. "Of all the asinine things — !"

He dismissed all thought of other matters, and, re-entering the apartment, he went direct to the telephone and called the number of Bronson and Bartlett's office. While he waited impatiently for Central to give him the connection, his memory went back to his first day at Claredale, when a dirty, bewhiskered individual, slightly inebriated, had come

to repair the lock of Bronson's front door when he should have gone to Bristed's. *Could* it be possible? A darned clever trick —

"H'lo!" said a curt voice in his ear.

"Hello! Is Mr. Bronson there?"

"Nope. He's out."

"Mr. Bartlett, then."

"Hold th' wire."

There was the sound of a plug being pushed in, the whirring of a distant buzzer, and then a new voice took up the conversation.

"Mr. Bartlett speaking."

"This is Peters, sir, Mr. Bronson's butler."

"Eh — oh, yes!" The Pear's voice, calmly business-like at first, became more friendly. "I've been hearing quite a lot about you lately, Peters. What can I do for you?"

"I wanted to speak to Mr. Bronson, sir. I've just thought of something that he ought to know at once."

"That's too bad. Mr. Bronson is out, and when he went he left a message to say he was going uptown and would not be back this afternoon. I can't even tell you where to try him on the 'phone. Has

your information anything to do with that wretched ruby?"

"Yes, I believe it has everything to do with it. I have an idea, sir, that I've guessed the thief."

"The deuce you have!"

"I'd better tell you, sir, in case you see Mr. Bronson before I do."

Peters thereupon described, as briefly as possible, the visit of the locksmith and his tale of a mistaken address. Bartlett listened with the greatest attention, though his occasional curt comments did not sound as if he were very much impressed with the butler's theory. The Pear, however, was glad, in a measure, of anything that appeared to exonerate Sidney, and he was also sensible enough to know that such a piece of information should go immediately to the headquarters of the investigation.

"Peters, you know Mr. Traynor, of course?"

"Oh, yes, sir!"

"Well, you'd better call him up at once, or better still, go to see him. He is the man to determine if there is anything in this."

"Quite so, sir. I'll attend to it right away."

Peters hung up the receiver, and then called up

the office of Traynor, Foster and Henderson. A woman answered, from whom he learned that Traynor had just stepped out and would not be back at the office until quarter to four, when he would undoubtedly be interested to hear of any fresh development in the Bronson case.

"I'll be there promptly," promised Peters.

The butler was on time to the minute when he kept the appointment, and Traynor was no less punctual. He greeted his visitor cordially, and Peters was not sorry to believe from his manner that the incident of the burnt papers was still being overlooked — to say nothing of a front door that had undeniably been slammed!

He was ushered into the inner room, and, after glancing about him, he decided, as Bronson had, that it was quite the best appointed office he had ever seen. His eyes came back to the detective as Traynor spoke.

"My secretary tells me you have something to communicate in regard to the disappearance of that ruby."

"Yes, sir. I don't know how important it is, but I thought you should know at once. It's just

this. The first day I was at Mr. Bronson's, a man came with a kit of tools and said he'd been ordered to repair the lock of the front door. After he had taken it to pieces, he called me again and said that he'd made a mistake, that he'd really been sent to the Bristeds', whose house is near-by. He put things back as he had found them, apologized for his error, and went away."

"For Heaven's sake, Peters!" Traynor looked annoyed and nonplussed. "Why in the world didn't you tell me this before?"

"I simply never thought about it, sir. I know one should think of everything in a case like this, but the incident at the time seemed very trivial and its possible significance never occurred to me until to-day."

"Well, well, better late than never! Of course I see what you are driving at, but suppose you tell me just what your idea is, so that I may see if it coincides with mine."

"It has struck me, sir, that the man wasn't a locksmith, at all, but just a plain crook. He may have come there in that disguise, taken an impression of the lock — which no doubt a skilful man

could do quicker than the eye could follow — made a key from it, and then burgled the house at his leisure."

"Exactly." The detective leaned back in his chair and thought for a moment. "It is certainly an attractive theory, Peters. Now, do you remember if he said where he came from?"

"He didn't mention who employed him, sir, but I believe he belongs in Claredale because I remember his saying that he was new to the place."

"Good. That gives us a point to start from, at least. It won't be very difficult to find out if such a man is employed by any local concern, and if he isn't, then it's dollars to doughnuts that he is our bird!"

After Bartlett's apparent scepticism, Peters was mildly cheered by Traynor's evident interest. The detective produced his note-book and pencil.

"Now, then, let me have the best description you can give of this locksmith."

"Well, sir, he was short, inclined to stoop, had black hair and a black beard, was the dirtiest man I ever saw in my life, and — I'm afraid that's about all I can say."

"It's about on a par with the average layman's description of a person," grumbled Traynor. "Fortunately, it is good enough for our immediate purpose. You've let me in for a busy afternoon, Peters — I don't suppose you've seen Mr. Bronson, or heard from him, this afternoon?"

"No, sir."

"He was here just a few hours ago. I have some news that will be of interest to you. You knew, of course, that he was advertising a reward for the ruby?"

"Yes, I knew that."

"This morning we received an answer. No doubt you would like to see it. In fact," Traynor smiled the ghost of a smile, "I know — from Mr. Bronson of course — that you have every right to see it!" The butler started slightly, but Traynor was searching a drawer of his desk and before he looked up again Peters' face wore its usual impassive mask. "Here it is."

Peters glanced over the letter.

"You're going to follow this up?"

"Certainly. But the case has now a somewhat different set. You know that Mr. Bronson is, if

anything, more anxious to recover the ruby than to catch the thief."

"Provided," amended Peters slowly, "that the thief is whom he believes him to be."

"Ah — exactly! And that is one reason why this information of yours about the locksmith is going to give me an extremely busy afternoon. If it should presently appear that the burglary was an outside job it would hardly be fair to let Mr. Bronson pay a large reward until we have exhausted every means of catching the thief. Don't you agree with me?"

"No," said Peters still more slowly. "I don't."

"You don't!"

"No, sir," repeated the butler firmly. "In my opinion the ruby is the more important no matter who the thief may be." He indicated the letter that lay on his knee. "You think this will turn out to be a genuine proposition?"

"I haven't the slightest doubt that it will," responded Traynor. "I am confident that it rests with us to recover the jewel to-morrow morning — for twenty-five hundred dollars. That is what I am now concerned with."

"It is worth twice that," said Peters calmly. "Isn't it true, sir, that if you pass up this chance we may never see the ruby again — even if the burglar is caught?"

"Yes. He would probably refuse to divulge its whereabouts if he were caught."

"Then I should say, sir, that it would be much better to get the ruby and make sure of that, anyway. I'm absolutely certain that Mr. McKittrick would much rather get back his ruby than jail a half dozen crooks."

"No doubt you are qualified to speak for him," said the detective drily, and again he gave a fleeting smile such as had embarrassed the butler once before. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll get busy on your eleventh hour news; I'd very much liked to have had it a little sooner, but, even now, it may still prove valuable."

Peters accepted his dismissal and rose at once. Traynor was no less courteous to him than he had been to Jerry Bronson; he ushered him from the inner office, through the outer, and had his hand on the knob of the door leading to the hall when the butler checked their progress with a movement of

his arm. He was no longer able to hold back the question that had trembled on his tongue throughout their interview.

"A moment, Mr. Traynor! Will you please tell me — "

The sudden dashing open of the hall-door beside them cut short his words. Both he and Traynor were startled by the abrupt entrance of a breezy, well-dressed young man who came in so energetically that he almost collided with them before catching himself up. He grinned apologetically, and a slight flush at his awkwardness suffused his clean-shaven cheeks.

"I *beg* your pardon, Jimmy!" he cried. "I was in a hurry — "

"Astute detective that I am," interrupted Traynor with a laugh, "I had guessed as much! George, this is Peters, the butler in the Bronson case of whom you have heard me speak; Peters, this is Mr. Foster, one of my partners."

The partner covered the butler with a sharp glance.

"Glad to meet you, Peters." Foster shot out a quick hand, which the butler grasped heartily.

"And I'm glad to meet you, sir!" answered

Peters. He turned to Traynor. "I expect I'll be off now, sir."

"Hold on! Weren't you about to ask me something?"

"It wasn't anything important, sir," answered the butler easily. "Good-afternoon, Mr. Traynor."

Chapter Eighteen

BETSY BELLE'S WHISKER

IT WAS about four o'clock when Peters left the detective's office, and for nearly two hours after that he was an exceedingly busy man. It was past six when he reached the house at Claredale, where, as was not unusual, he found all of the family absent. He changed his clothes as quickly as possible and was downstairs again, setting the table for dinner, when the telephone rang. He went into the library to answer it.

"Hello! That you, Peters?"

"Yes, sir."

"This is Mr. Traynor speaking."

"Yes, sir. Mr. Bronson isn't home yet. Can I take any message?"

"No — it's to you that I want to speak. About that locksmith."

"Oh — yes, sir!"

"I set to work on that clue as soon as you left

me, and with the help of a classified telephone directory I was able to get a good deal of information. I found two locksmiths listed at Claredale, but I was lucky enough to get the right one first shot. The name of the firm is Johnson and Shaw — their regular business is general hardware, but they have a few side-lines like all country merchants. Shaw is dead, but I got Johnson on the wire and put the thing right up to him — Hello, can you hear me all right?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"I told him, without going into details, that there had been a small robbery at Mr. Bronson's, and that our suspicions had been excited by the behavior of one of his employees — whom he recognized from my description."

"And what did he say, sir?" asked Peters, as the other paused.

"Well, Peters, I'm sorry to say that he was rude enough to laugh at our suspicions as if he considered them an excellent joke. Then he told me that the man in question had been with him nearly a year, that he came very well recommended, that he is a good workman, and that his only failing is the

one you noticed yourself — and which the Eighteenth Amendment has not yet corrected!"

"I see."

"Moreover, when I mentioned the date of the theft, Johnson was able to refer to his books and tell me that our man was in New York that evening attending the wedding of his sister to a man named Svenson, and did not return to Claredale until the following noon. Of course I looked up the records here and found that such a marriage did take place on that date."

"That sounds like a good alibi, sir."

"So I think. But I haven't told you all yet. Mr. Johnson surprised me by appearing to know all about the incident that has excited us; it seems that when his man came back to the store from Bristed's, he was more sober and better-tempered than when you saw him, and he confessed to the mistake he had made; according to Johnson, he told the story as if he considered it a good joke on himself."

"Oh!"

"Yes. I must confess that last bit sounded pretty convincing to me. Not conclusive, perhaps, because a clever crook might have foreseen just such

an inquiry as this and have tried to forestall suspicion."

"He'd have to be a pretty cool hand to do that, sir."

"I agree with you. Still, cool hands do exist, and I think it advisable to keep an eye on this chap. I hope to recover the ruby to-morrow, and after that, if we are lucky, our shadowing of him may enable us to lay him by the heels and get back the twenty-five hundred."

"I certainly hope so, sir — and that I haven't given you all this work for nothing."

"We'll see later. Meanwhile, give my regards to Mr. Bronson and tell him I expect to see him to-morrow about noon and return the ruby to him."

"About noon? Very good, sir. I'll tell him."

The butler hung up the receiver, and he had barely done so when Jerry Bronson entered the room.

"Good-evening, Peters. Was that anything for me?"

"It was Mr. Traynor, sir. I went to see him this afternoon."

"The deuce you did! What about?"

Jerry settled into his chair and listened eagerly to Peters' tale of the locksmith and of his two interviews with Traynor, the first in the detective's office, and the second over the telephone. Bronson was greatly excited by the account. Like Traynor, he was first inclined to scold the butler severely for not having reported the matter before, but much of his irritation was forgotten in the dawn of a new hope that something had finally turned up that would not only absolve Sidney from any connection with the theft but would also definitely disprove the theory that it had been an inside job. The broker's eye lighted with optimism.

"I have a feeling, Peters, that something will come of this! If we get back McKittrick's ruby to-morrow it will be a great deal, but if we eventually catch a professional crook for our thief it will make me happier than I've been in years!"

"Then I trust you will have your wish, sir," murmured the butler earnestly.

He slipped silently off to his duties in the pantry. He had been gone but a few minutes, and Jerry was still thoughtful over the news when Joan entered the library, still clad in her tennis costume and

swinging a racquet in her slender brown hand. She instantly noticed the new expression on Bronson's face.

"What's up, Cousin Jerry? Good news?"

"I trust so, Joan!"

He told her the whole story immediately, and the girl shared his pleasure when he told her of his premonition that this development would finally lift the cloud of suspicion from his household, — especially Sidney —

"Oh — Sidney!" cried Joan with a touch of impatience. "I have told you all along, Cousin Jerry, what I think of that idea! You must know as well as I do that Sidney is no thief!"

"Much obliged, Joan! Has someone been suggesting that I am?"

There was a sudden and unexpected interruption.

Bronson sprang from his chair, and the girl turned sharply on her heel. Sidney Durant, having let himself into the house with his latch-key, was standing in the doorway of the library, suitcase in hand. They stared at him as if he were a ghost.

"What's the big idea?"

He put down the grip and came into the room,

glancing from one to the other of them expectantly. His face was pale, but no paler than might be anticipated in one who had just heard himself called a thief. He appeared, however, more curious than alarmed. "Won't one of you tell me what it's all about? You look now as if you were rehearsing the third act of a melodrama!"

Jerry Bronson, answering a mute appeal from Joan's eyes, nerved himself to go through a trying ordeal. He managed to speak with due severity when he replied to his nephew's plea for enlightenment.

"You must realize, Sidney, that your actions leave much to be explained. No one is more loth than myself to believe ill of you, but your disappearance from this house, coming as it did simultaneously with that of the ruby, was certainly rather queer on the face of it."

"Ruby?" repeated his nephew blankly. "What ruby?"

"My Godfrey!" Bronson suddenly collapsed into his chair as he remembered that, if Sidney were innocent, he could never have even heard of the theft. He regarded his nephew sharply; the boy's

air of astonishment was absolutely perfect — whether it was the result of conscious rectitude or of superlative acting was not easy to determine. Bartlett had said it would be easy to fix Sidney's guilt or innocence by his bearing when accused — but, on the other hand, Traynor had warned him that the thief would probably boast of an unimpeachable alibi if he were ever caught. Jerry rubbed his head distressfully. The situation was too much for him.

"I'm beginning to think that I'm haunted by rubies," said Sidney slowly, as his uncle showed no signs of speaking. "There was a chap in Mainesville who darn near talked my ear off about rubies." He stared at Bronson thoughtfully. "He said he was a jewelry salesman — but I'm beginning to wonder if he was a detective?"

"He was," said Jerry flatly.

It was Sidney's turn to sit down abruptly, his attitude suggesting that he was comprehending for the first time how serious had been the charge against him. His face was serious; nevertheless, when he spoke again, his voice was firm and not untinged with bitterness.

"If you don't mind, sir, I think it's time we heard each other's facts and stopped discussing our fancies. Hold on, Joan! Don't go; stick around and let me feel that I have a friend at court!"

Joan gladly abandoned her tactful impulse to leave the other two alone; she infinitely preferred to stay and listen to this interview to getting it at second-hand afterwards from one of the principals. So she drew herself up on a corner of the safe, lit a cigarette, and prepared to listen attentively.

No public prosecutor could have marshalled his points more relentlessly than did Jerry Bronson, partly because he wished to justify his suspicions, and partly because he wished to impress Sidney with the gravity of his position. He succeeded admirably in both respects.

Many of the facts were new to Joan. Like Peters, she had never known of the existence of Maybelle Minnedinker, nor of the note that that financial genius of the chorus had held over his head. Now she heard all from beginning to end. She was amazed at the multitude of the small bits of evidence accumulated against Sidney, none conclusive in itself, but each contributing its share to the mass

of testimony against him. From the corner of her eye she watched his face, and she could tell by its steadily increasing pallor that the boy was shocked.

"Is that all?" he demanded tonelessly, when Jerry had finally concluded his indictment.

"*All!* Isn't it enough?"

"I should say it *was!* I didn't take that ruby — but if I listen to you much longer, Uncle Jerry, I shall begin to think that I must have swiped it in my sleep, or something!"

The broker's heart thrilled at the denial, but he was by no means prepared to display any gratification at a statement that, after all, he had expected.

"Well, Sidney, I have outlined the main points against you, and I'll be very glad if you can explain them away. Can you?"

"Of course I can! And if I'm not altogether proud of some of my explanations, at least they don't concern themselves with anything so contemptible as the theft of jewelry from a man to whom I owe practically everything in the world!"

Joan gave a quick nod of approval, but, if Sidney saw it, he made no acknowledgment as he continued:

"I gather that the ruby disappeared on the night that I went for Dr. Strong, and afterward went to New York. Well, it's true that I came into the library here to get the switch-key of the car, but even a monster of iniquity like myself is capable of feeling affection for a child, and I was a great deal too worried about Cicely to think of anything else. If I had noticed the ruby I would say so frankly, but it so happens that I just dashed in, grabbed the key, and rushed out again. That was the only time I was in this room that evening, and I repeat that I didn't even see the ruby — let alone take it.

"You remember we had our discussion about Maybelle late that same afternoon, and you can imagine that I put in the rest of the day wondering rather desperately how I could escape the results of my idiocy. You had wine out for the Derwins, and I was in the humor to drink a good deal of it. After dinner I went to my room, where Peters brought me some soda-water and I had a couple of high-balls from a private bottle that I'd brought from New York. I had a third later on while waiting for Strong to conclude his visit, and then when I took

him home, he insisted on my going in, when he hospitably offered me a glass of old cognac. Well, before I left him, I was ass enough to accept it — and then another:

"I started to drive back here, but it suddenly struck me that I still had time to get to the city and join the crowd that had expected me to dinner — I knew the night was still young for them. . . . Naturally I was pretty mellow by that time, so I drove to the station instead, caught the last train for town, and left the car for the garage to send back in the morning. My main idea, of course, was to go off on a party, and forget my troubles for awhile at least!

"I found my people all right, and among them was a chap who makes a pretty good thing out of playing the ponies. He was pretty well lit up, and, in a moment of alcoholic tenderness for me, he told me of a killing that had been arranged for the next day. By the way, in case you wish to check these statements, I'd better tell you now that the name of the horse was Betsy Belle — "

"Eh?" Jerry Bronson started in his chair. "Betsy Belle!" he murmured reminiscently. "'A

rank outsider; won by a whisker at 25 to 1. You don't get 'em like that every day! ' "

" No, you don't," admitted Sidney after a moment of silent astonishment. " But I didn't expect you to know it." He glanced somewhat cynically at his uncle. " Is it possible that after — "

" Kindly go on with your story," commanded the broker stiffly. " I can explain my knowledge later if I see fit."

" Certainly, sir. Well, at this point I must admit that I broke the promise I had made you to abstain from gambling, a promise I had faithfully kept — er — that is, with the exception of the flyer in Wall Street which I didn't think was a gamble!

" I gave my check for a hundred dollars to the chap who had tipped me off and asked him to place it for me on Betsy Belle the next day, as I hardly expected to get away from the office and down to the track myself. But, as it turned out, I did, and I never enjoyed anything in my life so much as watching that whisker of Betsy Belle's, of which you speak, bringing me in twenty-five hundred dollars even quicker than I had lost it in the market.

" My friend promised to collect our winnings and

to notify me by telegram as soon as he had deposited a check for my share at my bank, and I returned to New York feeling like a king — and not particularly conscious-stricken either, I'm sorry to say! I had an excellent dinner took the train for Mainesville, and received the telegram from my man the next day. I immediately sent my check to Maybelle, and, a couple of days later, she returned my note.

"And that, Uncle Jerry, is the true and simple explanation of the circumstances that have apparently weighed against me most heavily in your mind."

He ceased speaking, and for some moments no one broke the silence that followed on his words. Then Jerry drew a long breath.

"Sidney," he said gravely, "you have told your story very well and very convincingly, and if I were to obey my first impulse I would apologize humbly for having done you an injustice. But before I do so, for my own peace of mind, and to the end that you may be entirely exonerated in the thoughts of everyone, including those detectives I had to employ, I want to ask you whether you would resent

my doing just what you suggested a minute ago — that is, checking your statements?"

"Resent it? On the contrary, sir, I will help you to do so to the best of my ability. And I certainly want no apology from you, no matter how thoroughly I may convince you of your error, for I have at least sense enough to see that it was my own irresponsibilities in the past that led you to believe me capable of worse things when circumstances seemed to indicate me guilty." He raised his head and looked proudly from Joan to his uncle. "I think I may repeat now, sir, those words which seem to have caused you alarm before — that you will have no further concern on my behalf.

"I was ready enough to reform anyway, and the jolt that you have just given me this afternoon is quite sufficient to fix my determination. Add to that, I may say that I did pretty well up in Mainesville, and I hope the Universal will hand me something decent in the way of promotion — and I certainly don't want to lose their confidence by making an ass of myself outside office hours. So, if you'll wipe off the slate, sir, and give me another chance —" he hesitated, flushing.

Jerry Bronson stood up quickly. He advanced toward his nephew with shining eyes and outstretched hand. "My dear boy — "

"Dinner is served, sir," said the butler from the doorway.

Jerry ate that dinner with a better appetite than he had known since he lost the ruby. The change in his spirits was further exemplified in his library afterwards, when he was able to give his undivided attention to the papers which he had brought home according to custom. He hummed a tune as he worked, and when Peters came in at ten o'clock with the usual tray of glasses and ice-water, the broker was startled to find how the evening had flown. He looked up with a smile, and for an instant he was tempted to let the butler into the secret of his new-found content. However, he had never discussed with him the details of Sidney's transgressions, so he satisfied himself now with merely clearing the boy's name.

"Er — Peters! No doubt you have gathered by implication that I have been inclined to suspect my nephew of — of things he could not possibly have done. In justice to him I feel I should tell you

that he has absolutely cleared himself in my eyes. Absolutely! "

" I never thought he had any share in the affair, sir, but I'm very glad if you've had that load taken off your mind."

The butler's voice sounded tired; he spoke without enthusiasm — almost with indifference.

Bronson glanced at him curiously, his spirits a trifle dashed by this lack of cordiality on the part of one whom he had hitherto found a sympathetic and understanding confidant. A little chilled, he took up his pen and turned again to his work.

" Well," he remarked. " Let's pray that Traynor will be lucky to-morrow morning. We can all of us forget this wretched affair if we can only get back that damned ruby."

" Oh — damn the ruby! "

For one instant Jerry was honestly convinced that he had heard an echo; then, it dawned on him that his library didn't run to echoes. He started violently, and stared at Peters.

" *What!* " he cried, his dignity outraged. " *What* did you say? "

" Well, you damned it first," returned the butler

defensively. "I'm sick of hearing of the thing, and I get more and more ashamed every time I think of the trouble I've brought to your house. Besides, I've got a right to damn the ruby if I choose. You see, *it's mine.*"

Jerry Bronson clutched at his hair — and finally found it.

"What do — do you *mean?*" he gasped.

"I'm McKittrick," said the butler, bowing with an air of ironical deference.

Chapter Nineteen

THE ARREST

JERRY BRONSON had received so many shocks during the past few weeks that he did not easily succumb to fresh ones; he greeted his butler's astonishing statement with a lifted eyebrow and a mild air of curiosity.

"*You're* Reginald McKittrick? Then why have you been posing in my house as a butler?"

"Posing?" repeated the other with emphasis. "I haven't been posing! I've been a jolly fine butler, if I do say so myself!"

"Oh, excuse *me!*" murmured Jerry Bronson drily. "Well, perhaps you will explain why you did such a fool thing — if there is any explanation."

"Of course there is," answered McKittrick, flushing a little at the older man's tone. "I am quite prepared to explain, sir, but if you'd prefer just my apologies and my immediate departure — "

It was Jerry Bronson's turn to redden. He re-

membered that he himself had been in an apologetic mood in that same room only a few hours before — a fact that should have made him more cautious in his judgment of others.

"I am sorry I spoke so briskly," he said. "I'm sure you must have had a good reason for doing such a thing, and, entirely apart from whether or not you owe me an explanation, I confess I'm very curious to hear one."

"Of course you are," replied McKittrick, the resentment fading from his face, "and I'm ready enough to tell you — "

"Wait a bit! If it's anything very long or complicated, I wish you'd bring me a high-ball before you start — a fairly stiff one."

"Certainly, sir."

The erstwhile Peters started for the door, but before he had reached it, Bronson hopped from his chair and checked him with a hasty word.

"I'm forgetting — ! Sit down, Mr. McKittrick; it is for me to get it! "

"Oh — I say! " McKittrick looked distressed. "Please don't rub it in, sir. Besides, I have disclosed my identity only to you, and I am anxious

that no one else should suspect it before I leave your house. I came as Peters, and I want to go as Peters. So please sit down yourself, sir, and let me continue to — to buttle."

"Oh, well," said Jerry, relapsing in his chair, "have it your own way — but in that case, you'd better bring two."

"Very good, sir — thank you, sir!" answered McKittrick with a smile.

He was back in a surprisingly short time, as though he felt in some need of Jerry's hospitality — but, brief as was the interval, it gave the broker time to recover his usual equanimity. He smiled not unkindly at the butler's swift return.

"Now then," he suggested, "suppose you pull up that chair and tell me all about it."

McKittrick gladly obeyed.

"It's not much of a story, sir. You know I'm a writer, and you probably know that writers have their ups and downs, and are not always in possession of a very big bank balance. That was the position in which I found myself this spring.

"I have a book in the hands of a publisher but I won't receive any royalties until it is issued this

fall, and the small sum that I received in advance had to go immediately to the payment of interest on a mortgage with which I am afflicted. You see, I happen to own a couple of small pieces of real estate that are at present just in the same case as my book — that is, they are unproductive for the moment but should begin to pay dividends with the commencement of the fall renting season.

"So, I found myself pretty well busted, at least *pro tem.*, this spring, and when I saw your advertisement for a butler, it looked to me like a perfect sending from Heaven. It struck me that I had tumbled on a very brainy idea when I reflected that I could write myself an excellent reference, apply to you for the job, and settle myself for the summer, not only free from expenses, but with a chance to save a few dollars. The only weakness I could see in my scheme was that you might want to confirm Peters' references by a personal interview with McKittrick, which would have done me in properly. But I know how careless most people are about engaging servants, and, as it turned out, you only telephoned me, and, as I was expecting that, I was all ready to deceive you by disguising my voice.

"This isn't the first time I've taken a job, for that matter. In pursuit of material for my fiction I've turned my hand to a number of different things. I've been a miner, a stoker on a tramp, a ticket-chopper on the Subway, and a tattooed barker for a Coney Island side-show. At other times, during my periods of relative prosperity, I have employed butlers myself, and have often wondered while watching these engaging creatures if I couldn't improve on them considerably.

"So those are a few of the considerations that made me answer your ad. I would pass the summer earning money instead of spending it. I might perhaps pick up some fresh material for my work. I would repay you by being as good a butler as I could; and I would leave you in the fall and resume my own life with the chances a thousand to one against our ever meeting again.

"I suppose everything would have worked out as I expected in nine cases out of ten, but the trouble in this one began on the evening when you produced the ruby that was so amazingly like mine. I was anxious to sell mine if I could get a decent price for it, and I would have been more than human if

I'd resisted the temptation to speak to you about it. I have cursed that impulse ever since, and when I think of all the grief that I've brought to you and yours as a result of my initial deception — well, sir, I can only beg your pardon as humbly as I know how."

McKittrick had made his statement as carefully as if he had been telling the story to a crowded courtroom, with a stern judge and jury listening to him preparatory to forming their verdict. He drew a long breath as he ended, and reached eagerly for the glass at his elbow.

Jerry Bronson's scalp had been thoroughly massaged during the recital; his thinning locks stood up in odd little tufts as he answered McKittrick's appeal for forgiveness.

"I think you regard your offence too seriously — er — Peters! I was only a stranger to you when you conceived your idea; you had no intention of injuring me; you could not have dreamed that anything but good could have come from your summer of service; and it seems to me that both you and I have been the victims of plain bad luck — for which my carelessness was responsible, by the way."

"It's mighty nice of you to look at it that way," answered the younger man gratefully. "It encourages me to hope that I may prove to have been mistaken in another of my expectations, and that instead of parting as strangers we may yet become friends."

"I rather think we shall," responded Bronson meditatively, and reverted immediately to one detail of McKittrick's story that had impressed him hugely. "You speak of having unproductive real-estate — where is it?"

"In New York City."

"In New York *City!*" Jerry was frankly scandalized. "Unproductive real-estate in New York *City?*" He fixed the young man with a gaze far sterner than any he had ever bent upon his scapegrace nephew. "Who's your idiotic broker?" he snapped.

"Why — I — I haven't any. I've been managing things myself —"

"Oh!" said Jerry Bronson with rich meaning. He gave the potent monosyllable a moment to sink in, and then switched to another subject. "What has suddenly induced you to tell me all this? If

you had kept silent I should never have guessed your identity."

"Possibly. But I have some reason to believe that Traynor knows who I am, and naturally I'd rather tell you myself than have the news come to you from him. In addition to that, I find myself compelled to leave you — and there are reasons why I should reveal the truth. This conversation, sir, is equivalent to my giving notice!"

"Just my luck!" grumbled Jerry. "I shall find it hard to replace you, Peters, because, after all, you were a jolly fine butler — if you did say so yourself." An observation that both appreciated. "I suppose an employer is entitled to ask the reason for such an abrupt termination of a contract?"

"I was coming to that, sir." It seemed to be Mr. McKittrick's evening to flush up. "The fact is, I'm — er — going to England."

"To England?" repeated Jerry indifferently. "Why England?"

"Because that's where — that's where Wickle-combe is."

The simple words cracked a secret wide open.

"Eh?" Jerry started, and suddenly read the

truth in the other man's eyes. "Do you — do you — is it possible — ?"

"I do, and it is," answered McKittrick firmly. "I've got trouble ahead of me, I know, and that is why I'm going to ask you to treat this conversation as confidential, at least until I leave the house. After that, if you want to tell her the truth, perhaps it would be as well, — and I will count on the steamer trip for an opportunity to convince her that I'm not — not given to this sort of masquerade as a habit."

It slowly dawned upon Jerry that his butler had actually fallen in love with his master's cousin. He regarded McKittrick doubtfully. This was a new angle that warranted scrutiny.

"But have you any reason to believe that Joan — ?"

"None at all," confessed the butler somewhat gloomily. "Incidentally, Mr. Bronson, one of my reasons for telling you these things is that you are her nearest male relative — besides being her best friend. Before approaching her, I should like to know whether or not you would approve of me as a husband of — of her." He achieved a feeble smile.

"I'm not very wealthy, but anyway I've shown you that I can give myself an excellent character!"

"Um . . . It is possible that Joan — a very level-headed young woman, my boy — may prove less credulous than I. At all events, I'm quite content to leave it to her. If you satisfy Joan, you will satisfy me."

"That's more than I could have expected from you under the circumstances," said McKittrick, and again there was a note of gratitude in his voice. "I'll go ahead then on those lines and hope for the best."

The subject appeared to be closed, for the two were silent for a minute or so. Each was busy with his own thoughts, and it so happened that each voiced them simultaneously.

"About that unproductive real-estate — " began Jerry.

"What's Wicklecombe like, do you suppose?" mused McKittrick, and Jerry could not bring him back to such sordid matters as real-estate.

Peters' "jolly fine butler" justified the description he had given of himself by being downstairs

the next morning at a remarkably early hour. He opened the house as usual, did his customary sweeping and dusting with noiseless thoroughness, and finally betook himself to the library. It was one minute to six when he approached the telephone with a watchful eye, and it was exactly on the hour when he snatched the receiver from the hook lest the continued clatter of the bell should disturb the sleeping family. He drew up Jerry's desk-chair with an inward blessing upon the man who had called up exactly at the moment he had promised. . . .

"Yes, this is McKittrick speaking. Go ahead."

Whereupon the voice at the other end did go ahead, and to such effect that it was forty-five minutes later when McKittrick replaced the receiver and leaned back in his chair with a sigh mingled of satisfaction and exhaustion.

"Pwhew! Thank goodness I don't get many calls like that!"

The morning passed slowly, while an air of expectancy pervaded the whole household. Even Sidney caught the spirit of restlessness, and although he had not been puzzling his wits over the disappearance of the ruby as long as had the others, he

still waited no less eagerly than they for the promised appearance of Traynor. Twelve o'clock came and went, however, without any sign of the detective, and Bronson, on the porch, and McKittrick, in the pantry, began to wear expressions of concern. At twelve-thirty Jerry, for one, abandoned hope and went upstairs, wondering audibly why Traynor had not telephoned at least. Sidney went to his room and examined some long-neglected golf-clubs. No one noticed where Mrs. Bronson disappeared to. Joan, classing detectives and rubies together as nuisances, went off to the garage to inspect a new family of kittens.

Disappointment had followed fast upon expectation.

Yet it was barely five minutes after this dispersal that "Peters" broke his record from the pantry to the front door in response to the summons of its bell. His relief was manifest as his eyes rested upon the caller.

"Mr. Traynor! Very glad to see you. We had all but given you up, sir."

"I was detained," answered the detective. He handed over his hat and stick with an amused

twinkle in his blue eye. "You're still taking these — Peters?"

"Oh, yes, though I have explained things to Mr. Bronson. Of course you have known all the time just who I was?"

"All the time," admitted the detective cheerfully. "Ever since the first day I was here. Several of your books had your right name on the fly-leaf, which would have put me on the track even if your behavior had not. As a stage butler you would have been perfect, but, as the real article in real life, you were too darned good."

"Thank you, sir. And of course you verified your suspicions?"

"Naturally. One of your books in the Public Library gave me the name of your publishers, and your publishers, in turn, were delighted to show an admirer the picture of that rising young author, Mr. Reginald McKittrick."

"I see," acknowledged McKittrick a trifle drily. "You really do get your effects very simply — when they're explained. It is really amazing how easy it is for you."

Traynor smiled. Without any further discussion

of his methods he strolled into the library, where he drew a small white box from his pocket.

"You have it then?" asked McKittrick eagerly.

"Yes. Now, if you will be good enough to call Mr. Bronson, I will keep my promise to him by replacing it in the exact spot whence it was taken."

The dutiful butler departed silently on his mission. But it was not merely Jerry Bronson who answered that long-awaited summons. It was the entire household. By a whim of Jerry's, even Mrs. O'Malley and Julia Shaughnessy passed him in the door before he entered himself — the housemaid pale and palpably nervous, though the kindly McKittrick had so far forgotten the dignity becoming in a butler to press her arm encouragingly and whisper a few words of reassurance in her ear. She followed the redoubtable O'Malley into the farthest corner of the library, and there took refuge behind the concealing bulk of the queen of the kitchen.

Traynor gave a little stare of curiosity at Sidney, whose identity he naturally guessed, although he had not been told before of the boy's return. Sidney, on his part, favored the detective with a glare of sheer anger; the two might have spoken had not

the breathless appearance of Joan diverted their attention from each other. The girl entered the room flushed and breathless, a tiny kitten clinging desperately to her shoulder. The amateur butler, closing the door into the hall, thought he had never seen her looking more lovely and found himself — certainly for the first time in his life — wishing that he were a little black kitten.

Traynor greeted them all with a cheerful good-morning, and, catching Jerry's eye, he waved his hand toward the desk. Bronson made the distance in a few quick steps and bent excitedly over the little white box that stood beside his inkwell.

"That's it!" he cried. "Thank goodness, that's it!" He turned swiftly to Traynor. "Tell us all about it! You had no trouble? I was a little worried about you when you were so late in getting here."

"No trouble at all, sir. This is not the first time I've had to meet a crook, and it hasn't differed materially from the usual sordid business. He kept me waiting a few minutes, doubtless to assure himself that we were taking no undue advantage of him, and then he slipped quietly into the room

where I was seated. He had a drawn revolver in one hand — not taking any chances you see — and the ruby lying on the open palm of his other dirty paw. He was masked, of course, and he naturally never uttered a word for fear that I might subsequently identify his voice.

"I was equally discreet. I counted out twenty-five hundred dollar bills before the slits in his mask, thrust them into one of his pockets, and lifted the ruby from his outstretched hand. Then he vanished as silently as he had come — and since we had agreed to give him a safe-conduct, he may be going yet for all I know."

"But he might have shot you and kept the ruby and the money both!" cried Joan, her eyes wide open.

"And risk being caught and hanged for murder?" laughed the detective. "Whoever he is, this fellow is no such fool as that!"

Jerry drew a wallet from his pocket and extracted a slip of paper which he handed to Traynor. The detective glanced at it quietly, then flushed with pleasure and spoke impulsively.

"This is very generous, sir —"

Jerry silenced him with a wave of his hand.

"Nonsense. I am deeply indebted to you." He picked up the box containing the ruby, regarded the jewel lovingly for an instant, then turned and placed it in the butler's hand. "Here," he said. "Let this close a most regrettable incident — and never again leave me in charge of anything that you value!"

A sharp ejaculation burst from Sidney's lips.

"I'm sorry you consider the incident closed, Uncle Jerry!" He flashed an angry glance at the detective, who met it calmly. "Do you mean to say, Mr. Traynor, that you will consider this case as finished without making any further effort to discover the thief?"

"Yes, I mean just that," returned Traynor. His eyes were almost contemptuous as they met the young man's challenging gaze. "Remember, please, that I am acting under your uncle's orders, in the first place. In the second, it is my profound conviction that, even if we laid our hands on the thief, he would have provided himself with such an excellent alibi that any case we might bring against him would break down from lack of proof. Under

these circumstances it would be a foolish waste of time and money to pursue the matter further — so I think I may say definitely that we will never know who stole Mr. McKittrick's ruby."

Sidney opened his lips to make some retort, but checked his words at an abrupt and unexpected interruption. Every member of the household was in the library, and every one of them started visibly at the sound of a loud knock on the door leading from the hall — everyone excepting the impassive Peters, who walked to the door and flung it open.

Something like a gasp went up from those gathered in the library at sight of the figure revealed in the opening; it was that of a thick-set, powerfully built man with heavy moustaches, plain, ill-fitting clothes, a pair of feet whose immensity staggered belief, and a rusty, battered derby that he instantly removed as the door opened. Set in his heavy face were a pair of sharp eyes that looked as if they might be cruel on occasion, but now only held a light of amused, almost good-natured, triumph.

Some instinct told them at first glance what he was, though most of them had never before seen this stolid figure of romance in the flesh. The majority

of them thrilled in every fibre, as at an unexpected climax in the progress of some melodrama, but to one in that room the sinister apparition in the doorway brought only an agonizing pang of fear. Mrs. O'Malley felt herself clutched desperately from behind, heard a choking cry of terror, and turned to catch Julia Shaughnessy's drooping figure before it sank to the floor.

It is quite possible that the new-comer may have been aware of the mingled sensations caused by his unexpected appearance, but, if so, he did not indicate it by any visible sign. He was there to do his duty, and once his gimlet eyes had fixed themselves upon their victim they never swerved to left or right.

He advanced slowly into the room, and uttered no word until he stood face to face with his shrinking prey. Then he smiled, not unpleasantly.

"The game's up!" he said grimly. "I want you, Jimmy Traynor!"

Chapter Twenty

THE RUBY'S DESTINY

THE incident was over in two minutes. Either Traynor guessed that the game was really "up" as the Central Office man had stated, or else he decided that any preliminary fuss would be as futile as it would be undignified, and determined to reserve his defense for a more important audience. At all events, he rose to his feet after the first shock of surprise, nodded and shrugged his shoulders, and led the way from the library without a word or a glance for the speechless members of the Bronson household. Close at his heels, a wary eye on his catch, went the plain-clothes man. The butler hesitated for an instant, then followed them from the room, and eventually accompanied them out of the house and to the station.

He returned to find Jerry Bronson alone in the library, his slim hair very much on end and his eyes still testifying to the amazement that possessed

him. Part of this was due to the unexpected arrest of his own private detective, and part to the fact that his wife had just slipped down from Julia's room, where she and Joan had been caring for the frightened, hysterical girl, and had confided to her husband such details of the girl's past as Julia had insisted upon telling. Even the kindest-hearted and most humane of men, especially if he is the owner of a fine collection of rubies, must experience an unpleasant shock when he discovers that one of his servants is an "old offender."

"For goodness' sakes, Peters — McKittrick — will you?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Will you please explain to me what has just happened? That is, if you know yourself."

"I think I know pretty well, Mr. Bronson. I might have told you some of it last night but I didn't want to arouse expectations that the morning might possibly not fulfill."

He paused, as if to collect his thoughts, and Jerry Bronson threw in a quick question.

"But look here, — er — Peters; have the police any real proof of Traynor's guilt? It seems incred-

ible that the very man I employed to catch the thief should prove the thief himself. Isn't that what you novelists call stretching the arm of coincidence?"

"It would seem so, but of course you know that there's far more rough stuff in fact than is ever allowed in fiction. Yes, the police have ample proof. They raided the offices of Traynor, Foster and Henderson this morning as soon as Traynor had left them to come here, and they found enough evidence in that big safe to convict a dozen gangs, let alone one. Then Foster's wife . . . You may have noticed a woman in the outer office — ?"

"A dark-haired girl, with a rather hard face?"

"That's the one. Well, she confessed, hoping to reap her ignoble reward for her husband and herself when the sentences begin to drop. That clinched things, though the police had a pretty strong case anyway."

"How did you learn all this?"

"McCarthy — he's the chap who was here this morning — just told me. He shadowed Traynor from the office, but when they reached the Claredale station he stopped long enough to telephone Head-

quarters and post himself on the latest developments."

"I see. And who brought in the police to start with?"

"I did — yesterday afternoon. I guessed the truth when I was in Traynor's offices, and I went direct to Police Headquarters. But it seemed just as incredible to me as it does to you, and on the way up I decided to play safe. So I only asked for McCarthy, whom I had met once before, and told him just what I knew and what I suspected, and then waited for him to say I was crazy. But he didn't. You know, we amuse ourselves by poking fun at the Police, but in reality they are nobody's fools. They had had their eye on Traynor, Foster and Henderson for some time, and were only waiting for something definite in the way of evidence and identification. I blundered in with just what they wanted, and then the cat stopped watching the mouse — and pounced."

Jerry ruffled around for his hair.

"I do wish you would start at the beginning and tell me everything," he said plaintively. "Were these people detectives, or only crooks?"

"They were both. That was the chief beauty of their scheme. On the one hand they ran a perfectly legitimate detective business, and the police themselves give them credit for being one of the best of the private firms. On the other hand, they planned and executed a steady series of burglaries with such consummate cunning as to defy detection.

"Your having engaged Traynor was not such a coincidence as you imagine. Your attention was called to them by the use of circulars, was it not?"

"Yes."

"No doubt you thought your circular was one of thousands. As a matter of fact, it wasn't. As soon as they perfected their arrangements to rob this house they began mailing you their business card — just often enough to fix themselves in your mind against the time when you might decide to call in a private detective."

"The clever scoundrels!"

"Exactly. First, they would rob the house and possess themselves of the loot. Then, if their luck was in, they would be retained by you to investigate the case at a handsome fee for their services. If you didn't engage them, they were only out a few post-

age stamps. Neat, wasn't it? But, as you know, their scheme went even farther than that. Once in possession of the rubies, they had two strings to their bow. They could either dispose of them cautiously, if it seemed best, or return them to you provided you offered a sufficiently attractive reward. 'Safety first' was their motto always, and they usually 'found' missing stuff and restored it to the marveling owner — who paid up at once, and advertised Traynor, Foster and Henderson as being stars of the first magnitude! "

Jerry Bronson, recalling the eulogies of General Prescott, gave a sudden chuckle. How the General would puff and fume — !

"They had planned an extensive campaign against the wealthy residents of Claredale, according to Mrs. Foster's confession. That was why her husband was planted down here nearly a year ago, in the guise of a locksmith. He used the same method in one other instance as he did in our case —that of taking a lock to pieces and then apologizing for his 'mistake.' But usually he waited his opportunity and took impressions while engaged on legitimate errands. The police found in the

safe a number of duplicate keys, all neatly labelled against the day — or night, rather — when circumstances seemed propitious for their use."

"Beautiful!" murmured Jerry reluctantly. "So it was the locksmith after all."

"Not literally. Foster took the impression, but they were too clever not to guard against his being suspected. So he passed the duplicate key to Traynor, and on the night of the theft Foster himself went to New York and provided himself with an alibi that would stand the acid test of any cross-examination. He went to a funeral, to be exact.

"Traynor motored from New York — you see, they didn't even risk a strange face being noted by the night-men on duty at the railroad station — and parked his car somewhere while he reconnoitred the house. At least, I suppose he did, for the details of that night's business have not yet been definitely ascertained, and I am only reconstructing events as I assume they must have happened. . . .

"He must have found the house in darkness when he arrived. I was awake in my bed, but my light was out and I was trying to get to sleep; Miss

Ayres was sitting up with Cicely, but I have heard her say that she had the light in that room shaded, and the curtains drawn, so of course Traynor could see nothing from outside.

" He opened the front door with his duplicate key, entered, and shut the door behind him, quite satisfied that he had made no sound and had nothing to fear. He knew where the library was located — Foster would have told him that — and went directly there. I imagine his first action was to sweep the room with his electric torch, just to make sure of his bearings, and probably it was at that moment that he saw the ruby lying on your desk. Can't you see him chuckling as he put it in his pocket? He must have thought it an auspicious start!

" Naturally, the safe and your collection of rubies was his real objective; my solitary stone was merely an incidental bit of good luck!

" It was the last piece of good fortune he was to have. We did not find any marks on the safe, so it is reasonable to suppose that something interrupted him before he could even start work. That something must have been my insomnia. Probably he

heard me coming down the stairs and had ample time to conceal himself before I entered the library in search of the book you had told me I could have.

Then as soon as I was out of the way, he may have heard Miss Ayres retreating from her post of observation on the front stairs to her place by the child's bed.

"No doubt he decided then that prudence was the better part of valor, and a ruby in the pocket worth more than a score in the safe. A more reckless burglar might have waited until the house was quiet once again and gone on with his work, but, as I have said, Traynor and his pals owed their security to their caution. So he slipped out of the front door, closing it softly behind him, and went back to New York as he had come, in his car. He probably figured on returning some night in the future for the rest of your collection!

"After that, everything played right into his hands from the moment you engaged his services up to the time you offered a handsome reward for the ruby. He could even count implicitly on your objection to calling in the police, since he had found out in some way that you suspected Sidney —"

"Found out!" broke in Jerry Bronson bitterly. "He didn't have to find out! I just walked in and told him!"

"Of course, the twenty-five hundred and no questions asked was obviously the better of his two strings in this case. He advertised as directed, wrote himself that note for that fictitious appointment, and carried the whole business off like the consummate actor that he is."

The butler paused again. Jerry regarded him thoughtfully.

"You seem to have figured it out pretty well — er — Peters! By the way, you must have had a few anxious moments after you decided that Julia, in spite of her record, had nothing to do with the theft. Didn't you?"

The younger man, taken off his guard, started visibly.

"Julia?" he repeated ingenuously.

"Oh, you needn't look so innocent! You noticed that she collapsed when your friend McCarthy, whom she instinctively recognized as a detective, appeared in that doorway? Poor girl, she must have thought he'd come for her! Anyway, when my

wife and Joan got her upstairs and she quieted down a bit, she insisted upon telling them everything — including the fact that she had told you of her past."

"I'm glad she did. She'll be easier in her mind, and — you won't let it make any difference in her place here, will you?"

"My dear boy!" expostulated Jerry mildly. "I'm not a brute."

"I beg your pardon," said the other contritely. "To answer your question, no, I didn't have any doubts as to the decision I had made. She had absolutely convinced me that she was honest now, no matter what her past record may have been. She told you about the crippled sister in England, I suppose? I'll make a point of looking her up while I'm over there and — and see what I can do."

"You mean the operation? It's understood that I foot the bills."

"Not at all," protested the butler. "I saw her first."

"Julia is under my protection while here," said Jerry Bronson with dignity, "and her responsibilities are to a certain extent mine."

"Call it fifty-fifty," suggested the writer amiably.

"Done," said Jerry Bronson. "And now that that's settled, go on with your story of the interesting Mr. Traynor."

"But I've told you everything! Except one thing, which is a point you didn't know about. Did Julia say anything about some papers of hers that I burned?"

"Yes, I believe she did."

"Well, Traynor learned of that and mentioned it to me, and I have lain awake nights wondering how he knew, because the burning took place before he even knew of the case. The explanation now is obvious. His partner, Foster, must have kept an eye on the house the morning after the theft, just to see how things were going, and I suppose he met Traynor and told him of what I'd done. It had me badly puzzled."

"I also wondered why he had not given away my real identity to you. Oh, yes, he tumbled to that at once! Found my name on the fly-leaves of some books I had, and guessed the truth. By Jove — !" McKittrick suddenly struck his knee softly. "It has just occurred to me! He must have gone to my apartment and searched it, looking for something

to confirm the truth, and it was he who put my lock out of whack. That was what first made me think of the locksmith. And, in the light of his character as we know it, I see that he kept silent in the hope that there was some disgraceful reason for my being here as a butler. If there had been, and he had learned it, no doubt he would have tried blackmail! Yes, that must be it! So now every point is clear."

"Indeed?" Jerry's tone was grim. "I suspect that after the manner of your kind, you're working your story up to a climax!"

"Climax?" The writer was honestly puzzled.

"You've told me everything except how you guessed the truth."

"Oh — that!" The butler gave a little laugh. "I wish it were something that would redound to the credit of my intelligence, or to the remarkable acuteness of my detective genius, but as a matter of fact it was just sheer, dumb luck. It is only interesting as being an example of the negligible, unconsidered trifle that will inevitably, be it soon or late, trip up the brainiest and most cautious crook. If you will study the annals of crime — "

"I won't," said Jerry crossly. "What *was* it?"

"After I had told Traynor about my suspicions of the locksmith, I said good-by to him; but he followed me to the outer office for a last word, and while we were talking by the door it opened abruptly and a man came in. It was Foster, and when Traynor introduced us, he held out his hand and shook mine. Of course he looked as much unlike a locksmith as possible, but when he stuck out his arm, his wrist came well out of his sleeve — and high up on it I saw a mole. A peculiar blue-black star-shaped mole, such as I had noticed on the arm of the man who had repaired your front-door — by mistake!"

"My golly!"

"Funny, isn't it, what a whale of a difference a small thing can make? I was suspecting the locksmith, and when I practically spotted the locksmith in Foster, the rough outline of their whole scheme flashed into my head. The police just filled in the details. So now Jimmy Traynor, in spite of all his brains and cleverness, is kicking his heels in jail because he never appreciated the importance of a mole on his partner's wrist!"

That jolly fine butler, Peters, going about his

legitimate business that afternoon, was presently struck by a certain eccentricity in the behavior of Miss Joan Ayres. The girl appeared restless, with a restlessness that was seemingly connected in some vague way with himself. She was in the library when some errand took him there, and before he more than had time to realize her presence she had quietly got up and slipped from the room; she crossed the hall and settled herself afresh in the drawing-room. When he had occasion to betake himself there, he was just in time to see the flutter of a white skirt before it vanished through the French window that led to the broad veranda. It was some minutes before he could think of anything to do there, and when he did, Miss Ayres found it urgently necessary to re-enter the house and ascend to Mrs. Bronson's sitting-room on the second floor.

A dark suspicion grew and flourished in the jolly fine butler's brain. It was some little time before he caught Jerry Bronson by himself, but then he turned a stern, accusing eye upon the old gentleman.

"Look here!" he hissed. "Have you told anyone who I am?"

"Certainly not!" answered Jerry, virtuously in-

dignant. "Didn't I *promise* I wouldn't? I haven't said a word to a soul — that is — er — except my wife. Naturally — "

"Oh, is *that* all!" From the secure pinnacle of his bachelor freedom, young Mr. McKittrick bent a pitying look upon this elderly matrimonial slave.

Before he could give utterance to the thoughts that filled his breast, the sound of a distant bell automatically put the butler's legs in motion. He left Jerry looking embarrassed and feebly toying with his thinning locks, and hastily repaired to the pantry in order to consult the indicator. It was Mrs. Bronson who had rung, and the still fluttering disk showed that his presence was immediately required in her sitting-room.

He obeyed its summons a little more slowly than was his wont. As he came into the room, he was aware of a flicker of white disappearing through a doorway on the opposite side. The door was firmly shut behind it.

He found Mrs. Bronson seated in exactly the same attitude as on that morning when he had discovered her in the act of settling her bridge debts. She had just finished writing a check, and she

blotted it carefully before turning to the attentive figure at her elbow.

"Peters," she began slowly, "Mr. Bronson tells me that you are leaving us to-day."

"That is true, ma'am," answered the butler regretfully. "I'm sure I'm very sorry, ma'am, but circumstances over which I have no control — "

"But which you presently hope to have some control over — ! " Mrs. Bronson glanced at the door which had been so firmly shut, and a mischievous smile twitched at the corners of her pretty lips. "You needn't explain, Peters; I understand perfectly! " She suddenly held out the check she had been writing, and her voice became severely business-like. "This is for your services to date; I think you will find it correct."

"Oh, — I say! " The young man flushed. "After all the trouble I have caused you — "

"Nonsense." She continued to hold out the slip of paper, and he reluctantly accepted it, mentally determining to endorse it to the first charity that crossed his path. "Anyway," continued Mrs. Bronson, regarding him thoughtfully, "I'm not at all sure that this business hasn't been of some

good to us. Isn't there something in the Bible about plucking the flower safely from the nettle danger?"

"Either the Bible or Shakespeare — I forget which," he replied tactfully.

"Well, it doesn't matter. . . . The point is that the disappearance of your ruby, trying as it was, indirectly accomplished a number of good things. Jerry is much more careful where he leaves things, Julia will be happier now that she has no secrets to conceal, Sidney acts as if his reformation might be permanent this time, and I — I am not going to play bridge for points any more!" She smiled at his look of guilt. "Yes, it wasn't difficult to guess that it was you who told that awful Traynor creature about my debts!"

"My motives were good," he pleaded uncomfortably, "though I won't be surprised if you disbelieve me. You see, I was afraid that he'd find out about your bridge and go rushing off to Mr. Bronson, whereas if I told him myself there was a chance that — everything could be settled between us three without bothering him. Goodness knows, he had plenty enough to bother him. It — it was impertinent

of me . . . I see that now, but I really meant to act for the best — "

" It wasn't impertinent at all," she cut in. " On the contrary, I think it was remarkably kind and — considerate of you, under the circumstances. In case you have any curiosity in the matter, I may as well tell you now that I got clear of my debts with the money that I borrowed from my sister, when I went to visit her. . . . " Mrs. Bronson became faintly meditative. " Anyway, you don't owe *me* any apologies, because I told Mr. Traynor that I suspected *you!* "

" And a very sensible suspicion it was," he assured her cheerfully. " Butlers are not supposed to go around offering their former master's jewels for sale; I'm only surprised that you didn't have me pinched at once! "

" Well," she said, " I'm glad we've had this little talk, and I'll forgive your suspicions as — as you forgive mine! By the way, what are you going to do with that ruby now you have it back? "

" Why, I — er — " In spite of himself, his eyes strayed to the closed door. " I — I was thinking of having it set as — an engagement ring — "

"I might have known!" cried Mrs. Bronson, and gave a soft sigh for her lost ear-rings. "Oh — now that you have ceased to be Peters and become Mr. McKittrick, won't you stay here for dinner this evening?"

"Why — why, thanks, but I —" He hesitated, stammering.

His hostess smiled, and it was her turn to glance at the closed door.

"If you will," she said graciously, "I can assure you that we shall *all* be delighted!"

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